

level.19 To Embrace This World Is Pain

Presented by

AO JYUMONJI

Illustration by

EIRI SHIRAI

Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash



level.19 To Embrace This World Is Pain

Presented by

AO JYUMONJI

Illustration by

EIRI SHIRAI

Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash

level.19

To Embrace This World Is Pain

Ao Jyumonji

Illustrations by
Eiri Shirai

**Grimgar of
Fantasy and Ash**

Level. Nineteen

Haruhiro was walking toward the end.
That was what lay in the direction
he was going.

The closer he got to the Crown Mountains,
the more the sekaishu blanketed the ground.
The surface was almost completely covered
in them.

The worms had no luster at all.
Their darkness was endlessly deep,
as if there were no bottom to it.

Let's end it.
I want to end it.





*“You
okay?”*

“Aye...”

Renji often patted Chibi on the head.
Understandable, given how pettable she was, but he was overdoing it.
Honestly, it was hard to watch.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[0104A660. In Crushing Solitude](#)

[0106A660. Beyond the Quiet Night](#)

[0107A660. Involuntary Unease](#)

[0108A660. The Last One](#)

[110A660. History of the King](#)

[0111A660. Don't Be Afraid, You Coward](#)

[112A660. He Was Happy](#)

[0113A660. What You and I Want](#)

[0117A660. Song of the End, Echo Far and Wide](#)

[0118A660. To the Future](#)

[0119A660. You Are My Destiny](#)

[0122A660. Alive](#)

[Afterword](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

0104A660. In Crushing Solitude

How did it come to this?

Haruhiro looked at the onrushing black *things*.

Why did it end up this way?

He wasn't frightened. No, for whatever reason, he wasn't scared at all.

Black.

Why were they black?

The sekaishu.

Black.

Black masses.

Black.

Black waves.

Dark.

Black.

What was the sekaishu?

Haruhiro didn't know. How could he have?

Black. Dark. Sekaishu. Endlessly black. Black. Was that a color? He wasn't sure. Maybe it was a *lack* of color. They weren't glossy. Just black. The sekaishu reflected no light. That was why they were black. Why they *looked* black.

"What are you smiling like an idiot for?!"

Someone grabbed his arm. His right arm. Near the elbow. It hurt.

Ow, that hurts, man.

Haruhiro didn't say it aloud. He simply thought it. *It hurts. It really hurts.* Yeah, of course it hurt. How could it not? After all, look at his wrist. Not just his right

wrist, but his left one too.

That guy. The one from Forgan. One-eyed Takasagi. He'd stabbed Haruhiro's wrists with his katana. Yeah, that's right.

That's what had happened. He'd been defeated. His wrists, stabbed by that guy. Both of them. Just awful. What a cruel thing to do.

He'd been taken down with a katana. Impaled. That man, he'd used his katana to do it. These weren't shallow wounds. They were pretty serious. After all, he'd had his wrists—both wrists, left and right—pierced through. Because of his wounds, his hands were sort of limp.

The wounds.

Man, they hurt.

And when someone's rough with me like this, they hurt even more.

"We're getting out of here!"

So, please, don't pull like that. It hurts.

It hurts more than I can bear.

Maybe Haruhiro should have said something. Made sure the other guy knew. Why didn't he speak up? That said, the other guy was Ranta. He'd just ignore Haruhiro anyway.

But still... "smiling like an idiot"?

As Ranta pulled Haruhiro along, that was what bothered the thief the most. Smiling like an idiot. Him? Was he really? That couldn't be right. There was no way he'd do that. He couldn't smile in this situation.

"Guhyahgh! Oh hee ahee!"

Kuzaku was laughing, though.

"Nee gee hyah! Gohyuk! Rehyuk! Ahyuk! Hyuk! Hyuk!"

He was laughing like an imbecile.

Still, it wasn't like Kuzaku was laughing because he thought something was funny.

It wasn't funny, no.

That wasn't it.

He'd gone crazy.

And Setora was walking in circles like a broken doll.

Everything had gone crazy.

"Get it together, you dolt!" Ranta shouted right in his face.

Right after that, Haruhiro felt a powerful impact and stumbled. Apparently, someone had whacked him. In the left cheek. With a closed fist.

Haruhiro was staggering. Yet he stayed on his feet somehow.

He didn't get it. None of this made sense to him. Why was he steadying himself so he wouldn't fall? Was there some reason he shouldn't let himself collapse? It all seemed so silly. He gave up and tried to fall to the ground, but Ranta yanked on his arm again.

"Dude, come on!"

I told you not to pull me like that. Didn't you hear me when I said it hurt?

Oh, I guess I didn't.

Right.

It was true, Haruhiro hadn't said anything.

He couldn't say a thing.

He didn't want to talk.

It was meaningless.

What good would come of him saying it?

None. Nothing he could say would change anything. *He* couldn't change anything. That was beyond Haruhiro's capabilities.

I've had enough.

That was how Haruhiro truly felt.

It's fine. I give up. Just leave me and go. Do I have to spell it out for you? Why

can't you just understand?

Haruhiro didn't want to have to say it. He wanted Ranta to understand without being told. They'd known each other for no short amount of time, so it didn't seem like too much to expect that of him.

Why?

Hey.

Why don't you get it?

Normally, you ought to be able to.

Figure that much out on your own, okay?

Oh, right. Yeah, that's right. You never were normal, Ranta. For better or for worse. So maybe you don't get it. I mean, you're Ranta, so can I really blame you? But, seriously, just this once, figure it out, would you?

I'm at my limit here.

No, not just at it, I'm long since past it.

I mean, come on.

This is crazy, okay?

It's all messed up.

It's screwy, right?

Right?

It's insane.

Absolutely insane.

This is all insane.

Haruhiro looked for *her* and found her in no time. Of course. It wasn't that she was gone. She was right here. Turning her head slowly, surveying the area. Her chin slightly raised, and her eyes downturned.

No matter how I look at it, it's her.

Merry.

Oh.

It's Merry.

That's Merry.

In form.

But it's not her.

If she were Merry, he could swear, she'd never look at things that way. Those weren't Merry's eyes. But—he could swear? To what? What in this world was worth swearing on? He didn't know. Haruhiro didn't know anymore.

Anyway, she was different. The way she acted was nothing like Merry.

Despite her being Merry.

Even though she was Merry?

She was, and yet she wasn't.

She wasn't.

No matter how he thought about it, she was different. She really wasn't Merry.

Haruhiro didn't want to acknowledge that fact. He couldn't accept it and couldn't bear it. But Haruhiro already knew. He knew, and so he couldn't act like he didn't know.

He was there.

Inside Merry.

The No-Life King.

It was me, Haruhiro couldn't help but think.

"Aghhhh!"

It was me that did it.

It's my fault.

All my fault.

I caused all of this.

“No—”

It wasn't me, he wanted to think.

It wasn't.

I mean, what else could I have done? There was no other choice, right?

There hadn't been. Or, there ought not to have been, at least. Anyone, not just Haruhiro, would have done the same. So it wasn't his fault. Haruhiro was thinking this to himself, forcefully, as if praying it were true. He wanted to deny the reality before him somehow. Prove that “it wasn't me.” It wasn't. No way, no how. He didn't have to believe he was in the wrong or that everything was on him.

Right?

It's not like that, is it?

Everyone would agree, wouldn't they?

Of course, that was just what Haruhiro wanted to think. He knew that. Knew it so keenly it hurt. He probably knew it better than anyone else.

It wasn't his fault, but it was.

He'd made the decision. *Haruhiro* had made the decision.

Haruhiro couldn't have let Merry die back then. And this was the result. That decision had put *him* inside of Merry. It was Haruhiro who had put him inside of her.

He had never thought it would turn out like this. Not being God, Haruhiro couldn't possibly have predicted it.

But Jessie *had* warned him.

“She can come back to life, like me, who already died once.”

“But there is a price to pay.”

“This isn't normal.”

“It's common sense that people can't come back to life, and that's a fact.”

It was a contradiction. People couldn't come back to life. And yet Merry had.

Weird.

But it wasn't like Jessie had been lying to trick Haruhiro. And in no way had he forced the thief into it.

In the end, it was all Haruhiro. Haruhiro had made the decision.

"There's several people in there."

"It's multiple people. I'm sure they were all individuals at one point."

That was what Merry had said.

Basically, before Jessie, there had been others like him.

Those men and women had taken him, the No-Life King, inside of them.

You might say he was a parasite of sorts.

The No-Life King was said to have died over a century ago. A strange story, that. Could he die? Despite being an undying king? If he could die like other living creatures, then he wasn't undying. If he was undying, then he shouldn't have died.

Well, he hadn't.

The No-Life King had never died at all.

How had those like Jessie or Merry, who had lost their lives, managed to come back from the brink of death? How had they been able to move around as if they'd been revived?

It was the No-Life King.

The No-Life King had been inside them.

His power was the key.

"Moron-piro!" Ranta shoved him from behind. "Cut it out! Run like you mean it! I said run, dumbass!"

If he tripped, Ranta pulled him to his feet. If he pitched forward, Ranta sent him flying with a boot to the ass. Why? Haruhiro couldn't comprehend it in the slightest.

Why wouldn't Ranta give up? How was his psyche structured? What was

going on inside Ranta's head? Haruhiro knew the guy was stubborn to the core. There were a lot of things he was indifferent about, but once he fixated on something, he just would not let it go. Still, there had to be limits. At the very least, Haruhiro didn't think Ranta was the one who ought to be saying "cut it out." That was the thief's line.

In the end, maybe Haruhiro had proved to be the less stubborn of the two.

"Hey! It's this way!"

"Parupiro!"

"Argh!"

"You absolute moron!"

Haruhiro raced along the mountain roads, going wherever he heard Ranta's voice. No, these weren't roads or anything like that. They were in the middle of the sea of trees that spread out across the slopes of the Kurogane Mountain Range. The ground was slanted, and roots crawled across it, intertwining, bulging up in some places, dropping down to form depressions in others. The footing was incredibly bad, and those black things, the sekaishu, were in every direction, so the two of them could almost never move in a straight line.

Is this the right way? That was a thought that only rarely occurred to him. He was already winded. His throat and lungs ached. But his throbbing wrists, stabbed by Takasagi, bothered him far more. The arteries were probably fine, but the bleeding wouldn't stop. He couldn't think straight and had no time to collect himself, but what was the point of thinking about things at all?

It's hopeless. We can't possibly get away. Sooner or later, the black wave of sekaishu will either catch up to us or cut off our path. It'll happen any time now.

He wasn't afraid. If anything, Haruhiro was waiting eagerly for that moment. *Let it end. I hope it all ends.* If that was what he was hoping for, then he could stop. Just shut up and stay put.

Why didn't Haruhiro do that?

"The hell's that?!"

The next thing he knew, Ranta had stopped four or five meters ahead of him.

He turned to look back, not at Haruhiro, but at something behind him. *Is it going to end?* Haruhiro thought automatically. *Is it finally over?*

He turned, feeling a kind of relief, and saw there was a massive pitch-black globular body towering over him. From the right angle, it might have resembled a massive tree. But, obviously, it was no tree. It was too black, and if there were a tree that stupidly massive around here, he'd have noticed it before now.

It wasn't a tree. Black. It was a huge black tree-like mass.

"Sekaishu..."

He had briefly forgotten that they were being chased by the sekaishu. He'd been convinced they'd get caught in short order. And yet, here he was, unharmed.

Haruhiro looked around as if in a daze. He didn't see any of the black things nearby. Did that mean the sekaishu weren't after Haruhiro and the party? Maybe they'd never even noticed the group in the first place.

"The No-Life King?" Haruhiro mumbled to himself.

What about him?

How was he relevant to this?

"The world hates me."

That was what the No-Life King had said. With her face. With her voice.

That...wasn't true of Haruhiro. The world didn't hate him. He wasn't worthy of its hate. He was insignificant. Whether he was there or not made no difference to the world.

Haruhiro wasn't even worth taking into consideration.

0106A660. Beyond the Quiet Night

The pain never went away.

But Haruhiro thought, *I'm glad.*

Thank you, pain.

Thank you!

What for?

Thank you?

What's there to be grateful for?

It hurts.

It hurts so bad.

There's nothing but pain.

Was Haruhiro walking? Or had he stopped?

"Haru-kun."

That's Yume.

He heard Yume's voice. She was saying something. What could Yume be saying? Yume was saying something. That much he was sure of. But he couldn't make it out. And yet, despite not hearing her properly, he was nodding. Mm-hm, mm-hm, Haruhiro was nodding.

Mm-hm.

Mm-hm...

Why?

Why was Haruhiro nodding? What was he nodding about?

It sure is dark, he thought.

It's night.

Was it night already?

Huh...?

He felt that was strange.

Wasn't it night before too...?

Before?

Before what?

Before...

Before night. The night before.

The night comes and goes. Night and day.

So this night and the night before weren't the same. That had been a different night.

That must be the reason... No doubt...

Still, where was this?

Where am I again?

Haruhiro thought without really thinking.

Where've we been walking...?

We.

Oh...

Oh, right.

It made sense to Haruhiro now. Right. He'd heard Yume's voice.

I'm not alone.

Yume was with him. There, next to Haruhiro. Yume was walking by his side. Staying with Haruhiro. She was concerned about him.

"Haru-kun."

"Haru-kun?"

"...Haru-kun?"

“Haru-kun...”

Yume spoke to him every time something came up.

I’m not...alone...

Someone clicked their tongue.

That wasn’t Yume, right...?

It wasn’t. Yume didn’t click her tongue like that.

It was Ranta.

He pisses me off...

Whenever there was something Ranta didn’t like, he clicked his tongue. It must’ve been a habit.

Could he stop...?

He wanted to say “cut it out.”

But he was hesitant to.

Well... I’d rather have him here than not...

Yume.

Ranta.

And Itsukushima was around too.

Also, Poochie. The wolf-dog was with them.

Poochie... How long’s he been here...?

He hadn’t been around initially. No, not at first... At first?

When did “at first” refer to?

By the time I noticed...he was there.

What time was “at first”?

When?

Haruhiro tried to think back to it.

By the time I noticed...

What about when they'd left the Ironblood Kingdom? Was Poochie with them then?

He wasn't. No, Haruhiro didn't think so.

Somewhere... Yeah... We met up with him somewhere. Where was it...?

When?

Where?

Where...?

Where was this?

This is...

It wasn't the forest. He wasn't in the sea of trees that spread out across the foothills of the Kurogane Mountain Range anymore. The ground wasn't uneven here. Wasn't rising up and sinking down all over the place. Totally unlike those woodlands. It hadn't been nearly this easy to walk around there.

Where is this place...?

Was Haruhiro thinking that? Or was he saying it?

Saying it?

Was Haruhiro talking?

To whom?

To himself?

Was he talking to himself?

Yeah.

Yeah...

The next thing he knew, Haruhiro found himself nodding.

"Haru-kun?"

That was Yume's voice.

Yeah.

Yeah...

He needed to respond. Yeah. Needed to give her an answer.

Yeah... I do, don't I...?

I can't make her worry, thought Haruhiro. I'm okay.

I'm totally fine.

I'm fine?

Me, fine?

How am I fine?

Where...is this...?

It was night already.

Ultimately, that was all Haruhiro knew.

“Oh, screw it! Yume, let him rest! He clearly can't do it!”

“Mew. Haru-kun, you sit down here. Okay?”

Yeah.

Yeah...

I'm fine, though...

Walking, sitting, even lying down, none of it would change much. That being the case, wasn't it better that he keep moving? Moving. Move.

Was it better to move?

What for?

He didn't know. There was little Haruhiro did know. So very little.

Regardless, he seemed to be sitting. Someone had probably sat him down. Yume, who was taking care of him, maybe.

When he was like this, not moving, he felt like he was sinking slowly into the earth. He might have been exhausted. That had to be it. Exhaustion. An important concept. Haruhiro was likely exhausted. How could he not be? He was exhausted, and in pain too. Pain. Another important concept. It hurt. It really hurt.

Hands? Do I have them? My hands...

When it all came down to it, were his left and right hands even still there? Haruhiro couldn't sense them for some reason. Were they still attached? Had they fallen off?

They hurt...

Well, in that case, they couldn't be gone. They were probably there. He still had his hands. If he'd lost both hands, they couldn't be hurting him now.

Hurt.

Pain.

A definite stimulation and response.

The hands, which were there, hurt.

"Haru-kun, I'm gonna change your bandages, 'kay?"

Yeah.

"It hurts, right? There's no way it doesn't."

Yeah...

"Just hang in there a li'l longer, okay?"

Okay.

He'd hang in there.

I'm fine...

"Weird, isn't it?"

What's weird...?

"Yeah."

Whose voices were those? Two people were talking.

"That must be the Bordo Plains. It's an old battlefield, right?"

Bordo Plains...

"Yeah. That's what they say."

“The story goes that a long, long time ago, the dwarves fought against the Alliance of Kings and died like crazy out in the fields here, yeah?”

Bordo Plains.

That was what people had called the flatlands between the Kurogane Mountain Range and the Dioze Mountains long ago.

I think...

Though they were called plains, they were crisscrossed with hundreds, maybe thousands of thin ravines, like claw marks left by a demon god. However, because of all the grass and bushes, the ravines didn't stand out much, and there was a serious risk of accidentally falling down one. The Bordo Plains looked like an unassuming grassy field by day, but the area was, in fact, quite dangerous. And at night one could plainly see, even under the faint moonlight, that the Bordo Plains were all the more dangerous.

“I'd heard there were more moving corpses than insects. Could be an exaggeration, though.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Anyway, it's all 'cause of that thing. You know, the No-Life King's curse.”

“Yeah.”

“Weren't the dead supposed to start roaming around at night because of it? Because I'm not seeing any of them. What gives?”

The Bordo Plains... Oh, I see, thought Haruhiro. *This isn't the forest. It's the Bordo Plains.*

“They also call it ‘Dead Man's Field,’” Ranta said, sniffing. “I thought the place was pretty bad news, so I was bracing myself for it, y'know?”

“While it's light out...” Itsukushima was apparently trying to light a torch. “The dead hide in the countless ravines, and then they come crawling out when it's dark.”

“Ravines, huh? There've gotta be some around here too, right?”

“Yeah. Why don't you go look?”

“You’re not trying to get me killed, are you?”

“It’s not a bad thing to be afraid.”

“Who’re you calling afraid? Nothing scares a guy as awesome as me.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“As if I’d be scared. Nuh-uh. No way. Yeah. I’m just gonna go take a piss and look around while I’m at it. Just a peek, you know?”

“Be careful.”

“Heh. No need. I’m invincible, after all.”

“Even if you can handle the dead, it’ll still be a pain to climb out of the ravines if you fall in.”

“For anyone who isn’t me, right? Didn’t you know? I can jump around like I’ve got wings, you get me?”

“Sounds convenient.”

“Don’t just brush me off, old man...” Then, turning to Yume, Ranta said, “Hey, I’m gonna go take a piss.”

“You don’t need to go tellin’ Yume every time you have to pee.”

“Why shouldn’t I? Anyway, look after that moron, Parupiro, for me.”

“Yume’s watchin’ him just fine without you sayin’ anything. And Haru-kun’s not a moron, okay?”

“Don’t get mad.”

“Yume’s not gettin’ mad.”

“Yeah, you are. Be more tolerant. Let your heart fly free.”

“You’re talkin’ too much.”

“You ever think what’d happen if I were quiet? It’d be the end of the world for real.”

Ranta walked off somewhere. Where was he going? To relieve himself, maybe? Haruhiro felt like he’d been saying something like that.

“Haru-kun?” Yume put a hand on Haruhiro’s back. “Are you cryin’?”

Haruhiro shook his head. Was it up and down or left and right? Even he didn’t know. Haruhiro couldn’t breathe properly. He was gasping for breath. Like a drowning man. He was drowning. Even though this place, the Bordo Plains, was on land. Obviously. His lungs were spasming. His eyes felt hot. The inside of his nose did too.

Sorry...

If he opened his mouth now, he had a feeling something weird would happen. Haruhiro hadn’t said a thing. No words would have left his mouth.

“You don’t have to say sorry.”

Yet, for some reason, Yume kept repeating that as she stroked his back.

“Listen, Haru-kun. There’s no need to apologize, understand? You ain’t got nothin’ to apologize for. So stop it, all right? It’s okay for you to cry. You can go ahead and have a real, reeeeeal good cry, but don’t apologize.”

He hadn’t been aware he was crying. Who was it he heard sobbing? Probably himself. And yet, the thief couldn’t imagine himself shedding tears. What reason did he have to cry? He wasn’t sad. He didn’t feel anything resembling anger. Was he in despair? He couldn’t say he wasn’t. Still, it wasn’t like he had no hope. Yume was with him, and so was Ranta. Somehow, they’d both stayed by his side. Haruhiro sensed he was a burden on them. A liability. Since the group had Ranta, Yume, Itsukushima, and Poochie, they were already set. They’d be just fine without Haruhiro. The thief had no place here.

At some point, Haruhiro had lain down. There was something firm supporting his head. Something warm. It was Yume. Haruhiro’s head was resting in her lap.

Is that okay? he wondered vaguely. He felt guilty. Like he shouldn’t have been doing this, for Ranta’s sake. The dread knight had gone off somewhere, and wasn’t coming back yet, but when he did he was probably going to be pissed.

Shouldn’t I stop her?

But Haruhiro only thought those words. He couldn’t say anything. He was in no position to talk.

Honestly, the thief was grateful. Yume was doing so much to help him.

Haruhiro was touching Yume's thighs. Or rather, he was rubbing his face against them. More precisely, he was *burying* his face in them. Through his contact with Yume, he had a concrete sense he was connected to something. That was a feeling Haruhiro desperately needed right now.

Maybe it didn't have to be Yume. But she was the one next to Haruhiro right now. Only her.

He was glad it was Yume.

Haruhiro had no confidence that he could accurately describe what Yume was to him. She was a comrade and also a friend. But not *just* a comrade, and not *only* a friend. Friend, comrade. Those words weren't nearly enough.

"Ugh! I couldn't see a damn thing! It's too dark!" Ranta was shouting somewhere in the distance.

"Of course he can't. It's the dead of night, y'know?" Yume said as she stroked Haruhiro's head like he was a child, laughing a little. Despite that laugh, her voice was tearful.

Their loss was so incredibly great.

They had all had so many things taken from them.

It felt like they'd lost everything, and were on the verge of breaking. But at least things were quiet tonight.

Too quiet, really.

At some point, Haruhiro's eyelids had closed. He'd probably shut them. He thought Itsukushima had been making a fire. But he couldn't see any light from it.

He heard Yume breathing. Or maybe that was Haruhiro's own breath. It almost seemed to be melting into the night. He vaguely recalled thinking that. The night that had enveloped the Bordo Plains was turning Haruhiro into goo.

He opened his eyes. It was still dark. Not pitch dark. The sky now had some slight color to it. Dawn was approaching. Haruhiro was still lying face-up with his head in Yume's lap. She was lying down with her legs extended. Her hands

were clasped together, resting over her solar plexus.

Haruhiro tried to feel his hands. Well, they weren't *not* there. As he lifted his arms, he felt pain. Strength flowed through his wrists. He could even move his fingers.

He was in a better state now than before he'd passed out, at least. He'd been able to get some sleep, even if he wasn't sure how much. That might be why.



He tried to get up, but his head was all foggy, and he wasn't sure he should. He didn't feel well. No, he felt *bad*, but he'd survived worse.

The campfire had burned out. Poochie the wolf-dog was lying next to it. Itsukushima was sitting on the ground, resting his back against his animal companion. Was he awake? No, it looked like he was asleep.

Poochie raised his head to look at Haruhiro. Their eyes met. Then the wolf-dog immediately lay back down.

"Ranta...?" Haruhiro called the dread knight's name in a small voice. Ranta was nowhere to be seen.

The thief hesitated for a while, then rested his head in Yume's lap again. He had an excuse all thought up for it. This might not be the worst he'd ever felt, but he was still in bad shape. He was in no shape to move, so he had to rest. He didn't want to do anything, and he couldn't. He just wanted someone to tell him clearly that he didn't have to. Haruhiro was indulging in Yume's kindness. She'd let him do that unconditionally.

Haruhiro went back to sleep. When he opened his eyes again, it was a good bit brighter than the last time. Just before the sun came up, he guessed.

Yume was breathing softly in her sleep. Itsukushima and Poochie had gone off somewhere. To scout or something, maybe?

"You're awake now, huh?" Ranta crouched and looked down at Haruhiro.

"Yeah..."

His throat felt tight, and it was hard to speak. Haruhiro took a long breath. He might have had a fever. His wounds were probably festering.

Ranta clicked his tongue. The dread knight wasn't wearing that tasteless mask that he seemed so fond of. In its place—though they weren't a replacement for it—he had bandages wrapped around the upper right portion of his head and his left ear. They weren't just for show. They were covering the katana wounds he had taken.

Ranta had taken a slash from Takasagi. The cut—which started above the right side of his forehead, went diagonally between his eyebrows and continued

to below his left ear—might have scarred him for life.

“That looks pretty badass,” Haruhiro said in a hoarse voice.

With a snort and a shrug, Ranta replied, “I was always badass.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Bet you slept well. You’ve got a damn fine pillow there.”

“Yeah... I guess I do, huh?”

“You’d better be grateful, you piece of shit.”

I am, Haruhiro was about to say when, suddenly, Yume let out a strange mumble.

“Fwuhhh! It’s mornin’, huh?” she said, sitting up using just her abdominal muscles. “Mmmeww. G’ornin’, Haru-kun.”

When he saw the beaming smile on her face, Haruhiro couldn’t help but grin and respond with a “good morning” of his own.

“Sheesh... That’s some divine grace you got there...” Ranta was mumbling to himself.

“Whuh?!” Yume’s eyes were wide. “You’re here too, Ranta? Huh?”

“Don’t say it like I’m an afterthought! I’m not just another person. I’m the goddamn protagonist!”

“Muh? You’re a proto-mist?”

“No, that’s not what I said, and what the hell is a proto-mist?”

“How’s Yume supposed to know. You’re the one who was callin’ yourself a proto-mist, Ranta.”

“I didn’t say that. Don’t try to put your crimes on me!”

“Yume’s not tryin’ to give you any limes either?”

“Yeah, there aren’t any limes out here. This isn’t exactly the kind of place you’d find them, y’know?”

“Yume’s been thinkin’ for awhile, sometimes it feels like talkin’ to you makes no rootin’ sense.”

“You’re the one who makes no rootin’ sense! And what’s rooting supposed to be?!”

“Rootin’s like a close relative of tootin’ or floatin’, and a more distant relative of mootin’ and lootin’.”

“You’re messing with my head!”

“Yeesh. Is your hair all flat like that ’cause your brain got fried?”

“I was born like this! And wait...no one’s called my hair flat before?!”

“It sure is lively over here,” Itsukushima said as he returned with Poochie. The hunter had a number of large field rats hanging from his waist. He might have set traps for them.

Haruhiro tried to sit up and Yume helped him.

“Try not to push yourself,” she said.

“Can’t you even get up on your own?” Ranta said, smirking a little.

Haruhiro managed to get on his feet somehow, setting them firmly on the ground and taking a deep breath. He bent his waist, stretching, then turned his arms in circles, which made his wounds ache. That made him let out an involuntary groan.

Itsukushima smiled a little.

“You’re so young.”

His tone didn’t suggest he was being sarcastic.

“I don’t know about that.”

“Feeling well enough to take a look at something awful?”

“Am I...? Uh, well, maybe not. But I have a feeling this is something I have to see, right?”

“Maybe.” Itsukushima started walking. “Everyone, follow me.”

Poochie tailed behind Itsukushima. Haruhiro, Ranta, and Yume looked at one another for a moment. Then they went after the hunter and his wolf-dog.

Itsukushima hadn’t gone far. Not more than a hundred meters or so from

where they'd made camp. Once they'd pushed through about ten meters of chest-high bushes, Poochie came to a stop. It seemed the wolf-dog didn't want to go any farther. His snout wrinkled a little, a look of displeasure on his face. Or perhaps it was unease. Itsukushima, along with Haruhiro and the rest, continued for a few more meters.

There was a ravine on the other side of the shrubs. It was less than four meters across, and several meters long—Haruhiro eyeballed it as being about five or six meters. It was probably more than five meters deep too.

Ranta leaned out over the edge of the ravine and looked down.

"It's swarming with them..."

Haruhiro dropped to one knee and brought his head down low to get a better look. The sun was already rising, but he still had to squint to see the bottom of the ravine.

Yume crouched next to Haruhiro and hugged her knees.

"Nwuhohh..."

The skeletons and desiccated remains in the bottom of the ravine were piled on top of one another. There were too many to count. Some of the bodies were naked, while others wore helmets or chain mail. Scraps of decayed clothing clung to some of them. Many, though, were missing not just their clothes, but most of their flesh as well. War axes, spears, swords, and shields, or what was left of them, caught Haruhiro's eye. Based on their stocky bodies and beards, most of the dead here were dwarves.

"I wouldn't say 'swarming's' the right word," Itsukushima corrected Ranta in a dry tone of voice. "The dead aren't moving at all. When I came through the Bordo Plains before, they squirmed even during the day."

The dead had been swarming in the shadows of the ravines, where the sun's light couldn't reach, even when it wasn't night. That was how it had been before.

Yume clapped her hands together. She'd lowered her head and closed her eyes. Probably praying for the departed.

“The curse...” Ranta murmured. “It’s vanished, huh? The No-Life King’s curse...”

“Look,” Itsukushima said, pointing. “Over there.”

It wasn’t the bottom of the ravine. He was pointing to the steep incline on the other side. It didn’t have much grass or moss on it, just the gray and brown of exposed dirt and rock.

Is that a snake?

That was Haruhiro’s first thought. There was a snake-like creature climbing the slope.

Long, thin, and jet black.

“Hrm...?” Yume opened her eyes wide and stared at the slope. Ranta cocked his head and took a long, hard look at the area.

It was awfully long for a snake. Too long, in fact. Tracing it with his eyes, Haruhiro saw that the thing went from the bottom of the ravine, which was thick with the bodies of the dead, all the way up the firm rock-and-dirt slope and over the ledge at the other side.

It wasn’t the only one either.

There were several of the snake-like creatures.

“Wha...”

Haruhiro shuddered and looked down at his feet. Were they only on that side? He’d suddenly suspected that might not be the case.

For better or for worse, there were none near the group. But there was a black snake about ten meters to the right of them.

“Sh...”

“Whoa?!” Ranta cried out as he noticed it.

Itsukushima seemed unfazed, since he seemed to have known about them in advance, but Yume went “Gwuhwhuh?!” and jumped up into the air.

“Wha—Wha-wha-wha-wha...?!” Ranta was clearly panicking, but he had enough presence of mind to have one hand on the hilt of his katana.

There was something different about those creatures. They weren't snakes. They might not even have been creatures at all.

Haruhiro stood up. He walked along the edge of the ravine to the right.

"Haru-kun?!" Yume hurried after him.

Ranta hesitantly followed, babbling, "Whoa, man, hey! Don't be stupid!"

Haruhiro came to a stop sixty or seventy centimeters from the long, black thing. It had crawled up from the depths of the ravine and was headed off in some other direction.

Haruhiro looked at the sky, calculating the general direction based on the position of the sun.

"East—and maybe a little north, I guess?"

Was the long, thin black thing on the move, heading out of the ravine and toward the east-northeast? He wasn't sure if it actually was moving, though.

Haruhiro bent over. It looked completely still, but also like it was moving ever so slightly. He couldn't be sure which.

"How's it look?" Ranta asked, poking his head over Haruhiro's right shoulder.

What if he were to push Ranta out in front of him and make the dread knight step on the long, thin black thing? Haruhiro considered it for a moment, but unfortunately, his hands were out of commission. Besides, before he could do anything, Yume walked up to it and cried, "Take that!" as she gave it a firm kick.

"Why?!" Ranta jumped on Yume, his face a mask of panic. He pinioned her and pulled her back and away. "Wh-Wh-Wh-What do you think you're doing, Yume?! That's dangerous! What am I supposed to do if something happens to you?!"

Haruhiro was sweating bullets too. Though Yume could be overly bold at times, she wasn't reckless. She had her own way of judging these things. Something had made her decide she could get away with it.

Haruhiro moved up closer, poking the black thing with the tip of his boot. The stimulation didn't cause it to move at all. He pressed down on it lightly with his foot and felt some sort of subtle vibration. He didn't think he was imagining it.

The thing really was moving.

Had it come up out of the ravine to go somewhere? That wasn't clear, but he could see that it continued off until it was out of sight.

Haruhiro moved his foot off of it. It was less than five centimeters in diameter. Maybe three or so. Was its cross-section round? It didn't seem like it would be flat.

There were several similar-looking—actually, they looked exactly the same—things stretching out of the ravine—dozens, possibly, although maybe “growing” was the right word instead. That didn't feel quite right to Haruhiro either, but he couldn't think of any other way to describe them. He did, however, know what these things were. Haruhiro was confident of that.

“Sekaishu...”

0107A660. Involuntary Unease

“Shinohara-san.”

He’d been awake before Hayashi called his name, so he didn’t bother to ask, “What is it?” Shinohara sat up, then ordered Hayashi, who was standing by his bedside, holding a lantern, to go rouse the others.

By the time Shinohara had finished quickly freshening up and headed out of the room, Tenboro Tower was in an uproar. He and Hayashi headed upstairs to find Jin Mogis. The commander was not in the master bedroom on the third floor, but in the room with the fireplace on the second. One of the black cloaks was out front.

“It’s Sir Shinohara!” the black cloak called out to the man inside the room before opening the door. Shinohara and Hayashi entered and gave a salute. Mogis, wearing a fur nightgown, was in front of the fire with his arms crossed.

“Your Excellency,” Shinohara addressed him, which Mogis acknowledged with a grunt. “We have reports from the south gate and the east wall,” Shinohara continued. “Strange creatures have been sighted in the area, though we don’t know if they’re enemies or not.”

“Strange creatures, you say?”

“We heard the story directly from the soldiers who witnessed them, but we don’t know what to make of it.”

Mogis gave Shinohara a probing look with his rusty eyes. “You know the frontier well. I’d like you to confirm the presence of these strange creatures and, if possible, identify what they really are. I’m sorry to impose, but could I ask that of you?”

Mogis wasn’t sorry in the slightest, of course, but he made a point of treating Shinohara well, at least on a superficial level. The commander’s main weakness was a lack of reliable pieces to move around the board. For his part, Shinohara wanted to do Mogis a favor so the commander would owe him one. Eventually,

he'd use the man as a stepping stone—or a sacrificial pawn. It went without saying that he expected Mogis was planning to do the same to him.

"Very well," Shinohara agreed and left the room with Hayashi.

"What could they be, I wonder. These strange creatures," Hayashi said, seeming uneasy.

That's what we're going to find out, Shinohara thought, descending the stairs in silence. The members of Orion were assembled at the bottom.

"First, we'll head to the south gate," Shinohara said to the group and started walking.

"Um, Shinohara-san," Horiyui, a mage, called out to stop him.

Shinohara sighed, then began to suspect he was in a bad mood. No, that couldn't be right. He was the same as always. "Yes. What is it, Horiyui?"

"Won't you be taking your shield?"

"My shield?"

Only now did Shinohara notice that he wasn't carrying his shield, Guardian. His sword, Beheader, was hanging at his waist. He also had the ring he'd seized from the Lich King of Mount Grief, which he had named the Ring of Dust. Obviously, he couldn't wear the relic openly. It was hanging from a sturdy chain around his neck.

"Ah..."

Why didn't I bring the shield? He didn't know. Shinohara couldn't explain it himself.

"I must have forgotten it."

The smile he was showing at this moment was just a part of his act; he was playing the role of the leader who wasn't just strict and deserving of respect, but could be friendly at times too.

Horiyui was an okay mage, but she was nothing special. Despite her mediocrity, or perhaps because of it, her feelings for Shinohara went beyond mere respect to a love for him that he found trite. It meant he couldn't dismiss

her coldly, or else she'd get upset, but he also couldn't be so kind to her that she started to get uppity. If he failed to handle her delicately, she'd become useless in an instant. The woman was a lot of trouble for middling returns.

He was used to it. To Shinohara, other people were just pawns with wills of their own. If they hadn't had wills, it would've made his job much easier. But it was also that free will that let people move on their own. There wasn't much use for pawns that didn't move.

Shinohara hesitated a moment but headed back to his room to fetch Guardian. He found his indecision strange. The identity of these odd creatures was still unknown. If he didn't know what kind of danger he was walking into, it was obvious he'd be better off having the shield relic around.

Hayashi came over to whisper in his ear as they left Tenboro and headed toward the south gate.

"I've got an uneasy feeling about all this. I may be out of line, but I'll just suggest we may want to be cautious."

"Yes, I know," Shinohara replied before mockingly thinking, *An uneasy feeling, you say? How incredibly vague.*

Hayashi was a serious man with a strong sense of loyalty. He was steady too, never doing anything Shinohara couldn't predict, so he was trustworthy in that way. The drawback was that he wasn't very bright. He might not have been a total moron, but his ability to analyze things in a rational manner was limited. People like him tended to rely on instinct, premonitions, and the like, ultimately descending into spiritualism most of the time.

Shinohara suddenly realized something he hadn't expected. Idiots were easy to use. And yet it seemed that he loathed them more than anyone.

If you were to line people up in order of who was dumbest and start killing them one by one, it would be pretty satisfying to watch. If it were possible, Shinohara would want a VIP seat to that show. It would be the finest form of comedy. He might even let out a genuine laugh.

Shinohara had always looked down on stupid people. What reason was there not to belittle fools? He thought he was only doing it because it was natural to.

He'd never realized he hated them *this* much. And yet, mysteriously, Orion was full of nothing but idiots. The only one Shinohara would have recognized as sharp was Kimura, and the man was dead now.

Kimura had been a weirdo, but he'd possessed a good eye for things. He must have known, to some extent, that Shinohara was tricking them. There had been an aspect to their relationship where they each knew the other was tricking them, and they were fine with that. If Shinohara told the others to look right, they looked right. If he told them to die, they might be frightened or hesitate, but, ultimately, they'd do it for him. The men and women of Orion lacked the intellectual capacity to doubt Shinohara.

Obviously, not all of humanity was like that, so why was Orion full of such low-grade dullards?

Shinohara found himself followed by a gaggle of fools who were not completely useless.

It wasn't anyone else who had rounded them up.

It was Shinohara himself.

He hadn't planned it out this way. Nor had he been aware it was happening. However, without realizing it, he'd gathered nothing but idiots he could easily control, wrapping them in white capes.

That was why they made him sick.

Shinohara detested Orion.

The south gate was closed. The soldiers opened it.

"Watch yourselves out there!" one of the soldiers yelled out to them. The man had an unpleasantly ruddy bearded face.

The gate opened wide enough for them to pass through two at a time, and Orion proceeded through it. Hayashi took the lead, while Shinohara was in the fourth position. Five or six of them were carrying lanterns, including Hayashi.

"I see something!" Hayashi shouted, raising his lantern.

Shinohara stared out into the darkness. A well-trodden path stretched out beyond the south gate.

Hayashi was correct. The darkness itself seemed to be moving. But that couldn't be right. Predawn gloom was not a thing that moved. There had to be something out there in it. If it was moving, it had to be alive, but he couldn't hear anything like footsteps. The sounds were heavier than that.

Shinohara crouched and put a hand on the ground. It was shaking.

Tsuguta the thief and Uragawa the hunter had died taking Mount Grief. They'd been key to the clan's ability to detect enemies. They might not have been smart, but they'd had skills. Shinohara was annoyed. They weren't around when he needed them. They'd gone and died. Utterly useless bastards.

"They said they noticed something amiss at the eastern walls too, didn't they?" Shinohara murmured.

Hayashi turned to him, asking, "What should we do? Head east?"

"This road leads..." Shinohara began, looking toward the southern sky. The Tenryu Mountains towered over Alterna in that direction. However, the road leading out of the south gate didn't head due south.

"To the Forbidden Tower, huh?" he concluded. There was a small hill southeast of Alterna. Pretty much right next to the walled city. The people of Alterna and the volunteer soldiers who lived there had long used its slopes as a graveyard.

"Let's go," Shinohara said, continuing down the road.

"Huh...? Yes, sir!" Hayashi rushed after him.

Sir Unchain.

Had that man made his move? If so, there was no knowing what it might be. The Forbidden Tower was filled to the brim with relics he had gathered. So many that it'd become hard to tell what was a relic and what wasn't. It wasn't even clear what the man himself could do.

Ever since Shinohara had first been taken to meet the man by a woman named Hiyomu, he'd actively tried to curry favor. He wouldn't go so far as to say he'd gained Sir Unchain's trust. He'd been trying, but the way Shinohara saw it, the man was not the type to trust or rely on others.

Sir Unchain understood human language and took a form that you might be able to call human, but he wasn't one, not in the broader sense of the word. He'd maintained a longtime secret relationship with the margraves who'd ruled Alterna across generations. It seemed he'd even come to Tenboro Tower himself on occasion. He'd present them with unusual items or provide information on faraway places to earn their favor, while hinting that he lived inside the Forbidden Tower. As he was the only one able to open the door to that tower, they'd come to call him Sir Unchain.

Hiyomu wasn't as young as she looked. She had far more years behind her than Shinohara. During his investigation, he'd learned that a volunteer soldier matching Hiyomu's description had been active more than two decades ago. That would have made her part of a generation before Akira's, and he was a living legend.

How had Hiyomu come to be connected to the master of the Forbidden Tower? There was no way to know, but Shinohara expected she served him out of a desire for relics. She might have received one that restored her lost youth. Relics made the impossible possible. No, more than that, they transcended the laws of this world. Because they were not *of this world*. And neither were Shinohara or the others like him. They'd come to Grimgar from some other place.

In Shinohara's estimation, they had been residents of another world, and some event—perhaps they were caught in an accident or a disaster; he didn't know—but *something* had happened that had caused them to appear in Grimgar.

What he did know was that otherworlders first awoke in the basement of the Forbidden Tower. At that point, they had already lost their memories. They were then chased out of the tower and led to Alterna. Most became volunteer soldiers in order to survive.

Could Sir Unchain have been using the power of relics to round up otherworlders? That was what Shinohara thought. It couldn't be far off the mark. And he was stealing their memories, then sending them off to Alterna.

What was that eccentric relic collector, that inhuman monster, plotting?

He wanted relics. Relics of each and every variety. No doubt about that.

He didn't just search for them, he also investigated and researched them. Relics had a special energy inside them, one that the monster called "Elixir." This was something Shinohara had heard from the monster's own mouth.

The monster had abducted Haruhiro's comrade Shihoru, enticing her to join him after stealing her memories once more. The honeyed words he'd spoken to her had included the suggestion that he could return her to her own world if she obeyed him. Shinohara had heard this too.

"If our goal is reached," the monster had told her, "you will be able to return home to your world. The world you came from. The place you ought to be."

If their goal was reached.

Whose goal was it, though? The monster's, no doubt. But what was his goal? Was the monster's scheme a means to achieve it?

No, he didn't expect the monster to reveal his intentions so easily. They were just sweet words said to convince her, that was all.

But on the other hand, Shinohara had another thought. It might be that Sir Unchain, also known as Ainrand Leslie, wasn't rounding up otherworlders who'd come to Grimgar, but calling people here from other worlds himself.

If that was the case, might he not be able to do the opposite?

It could be that one of the monster's relics could return Shinohara and the others to their original world.

Shinohara began to climb the hill. The Forbidden Tower loomed high above them.

The master of the Forbidden Tower.

Sir Unchain.

One of five princes said to have been created by the No-Life King.

Ainrand Leslie.

Shinohara needed to draw closer to that monster, that fiend. He needed to learn more. The monster rated Shinohara as a valued comrade, one of a very

small number. He might not be able to take that at face value, but it likely meant that the monster at least saw enough worth in Shinohara to string him along by calling him such. If it was possible, he wouldn't have minded becoming friends with the monster. Indeed, Shinohara wouldn't have hesitated to become the best friend of such a loathsome creature. Yet there was no point in asking for that. If the monster didn't desire it, they would never be friends.

"Hold on, Shinohara-san!" Hayashi shouted, catching up with his leader. The lantern's light was shaking. Hayashi sounded incredibly agitated too.

Shinohara slowed his pace. There was no need to run. It seemed he'd lost his usually level head. "Oh, sorry about that."

"Don't be. There's something wrong, though. It's weird. The entire hill is..."

Hayashi wasn't angry, he was frightened. Shinohara came to a stop.

"What is it?"

"I don't know. It's like an earthquake... I'll take a look..."

Hayashi cautiously continued along the path up the hill.

There were white gravestones lining the hillside. Unless it was a new moon or the sky was cloudy, the clusters of graves stood out and were visible even at night. There were those who likened the meager white glow to the souls of the departed. Idiots liked to believe in the existence of a spirit inside the flesh, a soul that controlled it. What drivel. People were just objects—physical matter that functioned like any other living creature. If you broke them, those functions ceased. That was what death was. Why didn't people understand that?

The hill was awfully dark tonight. The red moon was out, and the sky was studded with stardust. Yet despite that, the hill seemed to be dark wherever you looked. Too dark.

Shinohara couldn't spot a single gravestone. It was as if the dark of night had massed together, covering up the white stones and hiding them.

The lantern Hayashi held in front of him cast its light over something odd.

"Wh-What's that?!"

No.

To be more precise, the lantern's light should have been cast over whatever the thing was, but the bizarre object wasn't being illuminated at all.

Without the gravestones and the Forbidden Tower, this hill was no more than a slight knoll rising above the field. Therefore, the lantern's light should have shown them thick grass all over the place.

There was definitely grass growing at Hayashi's feet.

However, within the lantern's light, there was one spot that, for whatever reason, remained totally black.

"The shape of the tower..." someone said.

Shinohara looked at the Forbidden Tower atop the hill. There stood the monster's familiar abode.

But had it always looked like that?

It seemed larger than usual.

Not in terms of height. Nor had it gotten wider. But it seemed swollen. The outline of the tower, its shape, was different.

It looked less like a building and more like a giant finger.

A pitch-black finger rising up from the top of the hill.

What was more, the surface of the finger was constantly writhing. It almost looked as if it were growing and growing by the second.

"That's absurd..." Shinohara said, gulping.

On the hill, the darkness that had enveloped it—some sort of mass of black things—pressed toward them.

This is simply absurd, he thought.

Was it even possible? No. It was an illusion.

"Ahhh!" Hayashi twisted about violently, like he was trying to shake free of something that had grabbed his foot. That was the kind of movement he was making. In fact, that was exactly what Hayashi was doing. There was something

wrapping itself around him. Something black. Hayashi turned to look behind him.

“Run—” was all Hayashi managed to get out before the black thing pulled him to the ground. No, it was more like it kept moving over Hayashi as it advanced. Shinohara looked behind him for just a moment.

This is no good, he thought. There's more coming. From the rear too.

It wasn't that he could see them. They were like the darkness, perhaps even blacker. But he could sense them clearly now. The black things were closing in from all directions.

“Orion!” Shinohara shouted, readying himself with Guardian and Beheader. The black things filled his field of vision in an instant, but with a grunt of exertion he knocked them away with Guardian, then he swung Beheader and felt the sword connect. It wasn't a dull impact. He felt the thing he hit break. It was probably more accurate to say that the end had snapped off rather than that he'd cut through it.

We can fight back, Shinohara sensed.

Black. Dark and moving. Were these things alive? That he didn't know, but Shinohara was able to knock them away with Guardian, and he could slash through them with Beheader.

But no matter how many he took down with his sword and shield, the black things seemed endless. How was the rest of Orion holding up? He wasn't doing so well that he could afford to check. Before he knew it, the black things were wrapping around Shinohara's right leg. Then, as he tried to pull free, they got his left leg too. The black things appeared to have a will of their own, a purpose, something like a goal. That was all Shinohara could think.

These things are coming for me.

0108A660. The Last One

Jin Mogis's life wasn't just covered in shit, it was shit itself.

The House of Mogis had always been shit. Enad George, who had founded the shitty Kingdom of Arabakia, was the king of shit, and Ishidua Zaemoon, the close associate of his who had plotted his assassination, was shit too. The stupid girl he'd raised to prominence, Friaui, was also shit, which meant everyone in the House of the Founder who was descended from her all had shit in their blood. It was said that Steech, the leader of the House of the North, who had feuded with them, was more or less shit too, and the idiot daughter of the House of Mogis, who had fallen in love with a prodigal son of the influential House of Ishidua, must have been the shittiest shit. Thanks to her, the House of Mogis got covered in shit and fell into circumstances that were shittier than a manure pile. We're talking some concentrated shit here.

Jin Mogis grew up hearing shitty stories about all this shit.

"We of the House of Mogis are special."

Those were the fetid words that so often leaked from his father, William Mogis's, shit-eating mouth.

The shitty son hated his shitty father's greasy red hair, clumped together with grime and dust, more than he hated shit. He'd wanted to pound sharp nails through the jaundiced whites of the old man's fiery, rust-colored eyes. Wished over and over that he'd get the chance.

"We of the House of Mogis aren't like the rest of these shits, Jin. Don't you ever forget that."

His shitty father went around bowing his head to all sorts of people, and somehow managed to make his only son a soldier in the Royal Army. Not that his son had ever asked. That shit was an unwelcome nuisance.

"Jin, you have a gift. I can tell these things. A gift for murder. I know, Jin. Were you eight years old when you caught and killed that dog from the farm next to

ours? You'd never been out hunting for rabbits or rats, but you could kill a dog. Did you know that's a serious crime? Dogs are property, after all. But I understand. You knew perfectly well that no one would ever think an eight-year-old brat could have been the culprit. Why'd you kill that dog? I have an idea about that, just a personal theory. The dog was always barking. It was too noisy for its own good. That's why you killed it. Am I right?"

It had been a spotted dog with bloodshot eyes. And it had bitten him once. That was when he'd sworn it would die by his hand. How had he done it? He'd planned carefully, then acted. At age eight. Yes. He had only been eight at the time.

"I know you raped that girl from the next village too. You were eleven. You threatened her, saying you'd kill her if she told a soul, right? You really pulled it off. How many more have you raped since? You've certainly developed a taste for it. I can understand. It's a good time."

His shitty old man spoke of it with a lasciviousness that suggested the bastard had watched it happening personally. Had Jin Mogis been seen? He couldn't imagine he had. But while he didn't know for sure, his father's account of events was too accurate to have been a wild guess.

"I know there was one girl who wouldn't listen to your threats, so you killed and buried her. Was it just the one? No, of course it wasn't. I'm sure you've killed several. I can tell, Jin. I know these things. Why, you ask?"

Because you're shit.

Because we're the same kind of shit.

William Mogis had beaten his own wife—Jin's mother—to death and buried her. Jin knew that before he'd finished the job, his father had decided it would be a shame not to screw her one last time, so he'd raped the corpse.

I saw it with my own young eyes.

Jin Mogis hadn't watched it openly, of course. He had been hiding as he did.

"Where's mom?" he'd asked the next day, playing ignorant.

William had plastered a thin, fake smile on his face and said, "The bitch ran

out on us. Well, it's no great loss. She was a dullard who never shut up. I'm glad to be rid of her. You agree, don't you, Jin?"

You piece of shit. What an absolute bastard.

The young Jin Mogis loathed William Mogis from the bottom of his heart. But on the other hand, that day, or more accurately the night before, when he had realized his mother was gone, it hadn't felt so bad.

Jin Mogis's mother had been exactly the kind of bitch William Mogis deserved. Being the kind of woman who'd willingly married into the shit-encrusted House of Mogis, there was no way she could have been decent. About all Jin Mogis remembered of her was that her breath stank so bad it made him nauseous, that she was missing three of her front teeth, that the remaining ones were black, that she had hairy armpits and a hairy back, and that she would start screeching violently whenever she didn't like something, then get physical.

He was the baby that piece of shit woman had shat out after copulating with his piece of shit father.

He was excrement born and bred. Truly shit.

That was who Jin Mogis was.

"You're going to be a soldier, Jin."

Every word that the piece of shit known as William Mogis vomited into his son's ears was like a curse.

"Jin, even if you'll never be a good soldier, you can kill lots of people on the battlefield. I'm sure you'll be fine no matter how many of your allies die, and the more enemies you kill, the more you'll be rewarded. Good grief. I should've become a military man myself. Might have made something of myself by now if I had. Still, to tell you the truth, the House of Mogis is hated. Originally, our family was feared. Our great ancestor, Zaburo Mogis, was Enad George's pet assassin—a skilled murderer. He'd disappear anyone who got on Enad's bad side. He didn't even have to be ordered to kill a guy; Zaburo just knew when someone needed to die. He was the kind of man who'd commit a murder before breakfast, another after lunch, a third before dinner, and then close out

the day with one last murder before going to bed. Do you get it, Jin? You do, don't you? Well, that's what our ancestor did, working for Enad. He killed people like crazy. Jin, I'm going to tell you something. 'Zaburo Mogis' was a name that Enad gave him. His real name, it was 'Mogi Zaburow.' Mogi Zaburow was a special sort of assassin. Enad was able to climb his way up to being king because Mogi Zaburow repeatedly murdered anyone who got in his way. That's the relationship our ancestor had with Enad. And that's why once Enad got taken down by Ishidua Zaemoon, the House of Mogis's fate was sealed. But the higher-ups are still leery of people from our house. They never know what we're gonna do. Because we of the House of Mogis, we're special..."

"Bring me a horse!" Jin Mogis shouted with foggy breath as he left through the main gate of Tenboro Tower. The sky was brightening with the impending dawn.

"Sire, here!" One of his black-cloaked personal attendants led a horse with vibrantly gray hair over to Mogis by its reins. Mogis waved his hand as if swatting away a fly.

"That one's no good! Bring another!"

There were a number of horses from the mainland saddled up and waiting near the main entrance. One of them was a small dark bay horse.

"That one will do," Mogis declared, pointing at the dark bay horse. The black cloak hurriedly brought it to him. Mogis straddled the horse. He'd never ridden on this one before. It was a bit small for him, but solidly built. Why had he chosen this horse? Mogis never thought about it. It was the right decision. He was confident of that.

"I'm taking command of the defense of Alterna! Anyone who can ride a horse, mount up and come with me! The rest of you, follow on foot!"

The black cloaks and other soldiers answered him, their shouts rising almost to a roar.

Mogis drove his horse forward. The chaos was worst near the south gate, but Mogis directed his horse toward the north gate. He never turned to look behind him. The dark bay horse had good legs despite its short stature and responded

well to his control of the reins. And unlike the gray, it wouldn't stand out.

The north gate up ahead of them was shut. Soldiers were massed around it and up into the watchtowers.

"Commander Mogis!"

"Commander!"

"He's here! Commander Mogis is here!"

They started making a big fuss. Mogis slowed his horse a little and ordered the gates open.

"O-Open the gates...?"

He watched confusion spread through the crowd of soldiers.

Mogis had been up on top of the walls to check the situation for himself. Something bizarre was going on out there. It had almost looked like a river had overflowed its banks in heavy rain, triggering a flood. But there was no rain, and no river near Alterna that could cause such a flood. It wasn't water out there. It was dark and possibly liquid, though he wasn't sure of that, but it definitely had no fixed shape. Countless unidentified black entities were squirming about, surging over the landscape. Some of them struck the walls of Alterna, but they hadn't come over the ramparts. Alterna hadn't been breached. The walls were defending the Frontier Army from the black entities.

"Enough talk! Open them at once!" Mogis yelled, and the soldier moved to follow his orders immediately.

The unidentified black entities hadn't gotten inside Alterna yet. From what Mogis could tell, the entities were more focused around the hill to the southeast. Were the black streams flowing in that direction? The Forbidden Tower, which stood atop the hill, had completely changed. It had grown to several times its former size, covered in black objects.

Whatever these black things were, the Frontier Army would probably be safe so long as they stayed shut up inside the walls of Alterna. Every storm, no matter how large, would pass eventually. They only needed to wait for that to happen.

“Hurry!”

The soldiers rushed to open the gate as Mogis shouted at them. It was already open wide enough for a person to pass through, or maybe two at a time.

“If you want to survive, do as I say! Let’s go!”

Mogis suddenly spurred his horse onward.

The dark bay reared back in surprise, its front hooves in the air.

“Hi-yah!” Mogis delivered a quick slap to the horse’s backside. It took off running, with both man and horse going through the gate in an instant.

There was no guarantee they’d be safe inside the walls—none at all. That was what Mogis’s intuition told him.

It was rare for him to think things through logically like, *Should I kill this guy? Or not?* That was too slow. He’d act too late. He needed to kill as soon as he thought, *All right, I’m gonna kill him.* Ideally, he’d kill them *before* he thought to. That was the easiest time to do it.

But Mogis truly did feel hesitant. Should he kill the prey before him? If that were the only question, it would have been easy. But reality tended to be more complicated than that. Even Jin Mogis hesitated sometimes. Worried about what to do, even.

Honestly, up until the point Mogis had left Tenboro Tower, the commander hadn’t been set on this course of action. Shinohara, who’d left through the south gate, hadn’t returned. He was probably not in a good situation. That man was quite skilled and knew the frontier better than Mogis did. Yet he hadn’t come back.

That meant it was pretty dangerous outside. Wouldn’t it have been wiser to stay put here? If Mogis was going to make a move, he could have waited until he was forced to.

But he was frightened. Even Jin Mogis, born into the infamous House of Mogis, felt fear sometimes. He had no idea what it was that had inspired this fear in him, and he feared what he did not know.

Mogis had never died before. That was why he feared death. Despite all the

people he'd killed, all those he'd seen die, he had no idea what they experienced as they passed from this life. Was death nothingness? Or did the dead experience a different kind of perception from the living? Was it possible they went to a world of the dead?

The first time Mogis had returned home on leave from the army, he'd killed his father. It had been a mercy killing, as far as he was concerned. His father had been sick. Some kind of organ failure. He'd wasted away, his ashen face not so different from that of a corpse. Unable to rise from the rotting bed he lay on, he had struggled even to cough.

"How about I put you out of your misery, old man?"

When his son made the offer, William Mogis had considered it long and hard, then answered, "Yeah, sure," his voice like the wind across a desolate plain. "Maybe that doesn't sound so bad."

"I have a favor to ask."

"What? Ask away, Jin."

"I know I said I'd put you out of your misery, but I want to do it little by little. There's something I need to know."

"What's that?"

"How do people die? What do they see? What do they hear? What do they think?"

"I'm interested in that too. When most people die, it's like, 'What, that's it?'"

"I had a feeling this day would come, old man."

"What a coincidence. So did I, Jin."

He had been as careful as he could be, but William Mogis had still died in a manner that would make you say, "What, that's it?" Unfortunately, he had been too far gone by that point to die slowly. The invalid whose life could have run out at any time quickly found himself unable to breathe, and then his heart stopped. Jin Mogis had thought he might be able to restart the heart by cutting his father's chest open and giving it a massage, but the effort had been wasted.

In every way, in every facet of his life, William Mogis had been no more than a

useless piece of shit. And leaving behind the blood of the House of Mogis, that vile shit juice, was the most harmful shit he had ever done.

Not long after the army had exited the north gate, their path was obstructed by a black river. Jin Mogis had his horse continue to the northwest. Then, pulling on the reins, he turned it further west. A stream of black things lay ahead of them there too.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to Mogis: *Do I have any children?*

As his father had pointed out, Jin Mogis had been raping women from a young age. How many had he violated? He couldn't be bothered to keep count. When the urge took him, there was no reason to hold back.

I want a child of my own.

I want to leave the Mogis blood behind.

He'd never had such an urge before.

Women were simply an outlet for Mogis's lust. They might have been even less than that at times, but they were most definitely never more. Some women obeyed him readily, while others resisted. He'd screwed the same woman repeatedly before too. But Mogis had never loved anyone, woman or otherwise.

Had he ever heard rumors of one of the women he'd screwed getting pregnant afterward? Obviously, when he violated a woman he just happened across, he never saw her again. He couldn't be sure none of them had borne a child with the blood of the House of Mogis.

During a battle with the southern barbarians, Mogis had taken a wound that had caused him to lose his testicles. In the jungles of the south, there was one despicable tribe of savages that would hide in the bushes, persistently targeting their enemies' gonads. The soldiers called them ankle-cutters and ball-hunters. He'd never live down the humiliation of knowing what had been done to him by those savages. It was his greatest pain, his deepest shame. He'd kept the loss of his testicles a secret, even killing several people just to shut them up.

He hadn't raped a woman since.

There'd been no need.

He couldn't do it anymore.

"Not yet," Mogis said, looking down at his left hand, holding the reins. He wore a big ring on his left index finger—gold with a blue stone. The patterns floating on its surface weren't scratches or stains.

They looked like flower petals.

Two petals shone and shimmered inside the blue stone.

This was no mere ring. It was a gift, given to him by the master of the Forbidden Tower, Sir Unchain, to cement their alliance. Mogis had already tested its effects for himself.

Mogis felt the urge to turn around on the back of his horse. The foot soldiers had never stood a chance, but perhaps a number of the riders had kept up with him? Or had things gotten so bad that he, the Commander of the Frontier Army, was reduced to riding around on his own?

He'd abandoned his men to save his own skin. Even if someone were to call him out for his cowardice, it wouldn't have bothered him in the slightest. Because Jin Mogis was a piece of shit born from a piece of shit. He might say he wasn't just shit; he was a special kind of shit. But when all was said and done, shit was shit. He'd never had a shred of conscience. And being shit, he wasn't burdened with the sense of pride humans had. He'd do all sorts of shitty things, swimming through an ocean of shit, eating shit if he had to, in order to survive.

He wasn't like his father—not like William Mogis.

William Mogis had been weakened after suffering from illness for so long. He'd wanted to be put to rest. But he couldn't have ended his life on his own. As his appetite had dwindled, and he'd even lost the ability to drink water, all he had been able to do was wait for his last breath to come.

Please, kill me, he'd pleaded with his son with glazed eyes. The man hadn't been human; he'd been a piece of shit among pieces of shit, but he had still loved his son in his own way. You might even say he had fawned over Jin. The apple hadn't fallen far from the tree. They were birds of a feather. Shit birds. Jin Mogis could read his father's feelings as if they were his own.

It's fine.

Hey, Jin.

Even if I die, you're still here.

The rest is up to you.

Live on. Survive. Kill. Kill a whole lot. Get out there and rape women.

Leave behind children.

Preserve our blood.

The special blood of the House of Mogis.

If his father had held on a little longer and not died so easily, Jin Mogis might have whispered these words to him as his son:

I know, old man.

You can move on in peace.

The Mogis bloodline is still here.

But the only Mogis left now was the heaping pile of shit, Jin Mogis, and he'd lost his gonads.

"It's not my time yet!" Jin Mogis declared, furiously digging his heels into his horse's sides, urging the beast onward. The ground wasn't a black lake. There were black streams running this way and that across it, but they didn't cover it entirely. Mogis raced his horse across the gaps between them.

Where was he running to? He'd changed direction so many times, he might have been going back the way he'd come.

No, I'm fleeing. I'm going to get away from here.

He'd nearly died in the south too. The scion of the House of Mogis had been mercilessly sent off to the front lines even as a fresh recruit. The front line squads had hardly any priests of Lumiaris. Soldiers had just been forced to treat one another if they got wounded. Anyone who came down with a fever would be abandoned to rest in the shade somewhere. It had been too muggy to wear armor either. They'd roamed the jungle almost naked, had killed any barbarians that attacked them, and had stolen food and water from their assailants. It

wasn't just the barbarians, though. Sometimes they fought with their own allies for supplies. He'd nearly been killed by his fellow soldiers on multiple occasions. He'd fought back and gotten them instead, of course.

His horse was exhausted and sweating profusely.

Jin Mogis finally turned to look back. There was just one black cloak still desperately following Mogis on horseback. That said, the man was twenty, no, thirty meters behind him.

"Commander!" the black cloak cried, his voice shrill. His horse's legs suddenly gave out, and it pitched forward. The black cloak was thrown from his saddle and sailed through the air. In no time at all, a black stream rushed over his horse, swallowing it up.

"What is that?"

Mogis stared, eyes wide. There was something riding the black stream that swallowed the black cloak's horse. It, too, was black. Something so dark it seemed to be wrapped in the night itself was standing atop the black stream.

It looks almost...human, Mogis thought as he noticed it was carrying a short sword in its right hand and a shield with a dull silver luster in its left.

The night-clad one swung its sword. It danced through the air, easily slicing up the last black cloak. Then it came for Mogis, still riding the black stream.

Mogis turned to face it, laughing despite himself. He laughed and laughed and laughed. The House of Mogis was probably cursed. This world was trying to purge itself of their blood. In all likelihood, destruction was the fate that awaited him.

But what of it?

If you can kill me, then kill me. My blood is special. I won't die just yet. I'm going to keep on living. I'll show you I can survive.

110A660. History of the King

The chief of the Gogun clan, unifier of the orc clans, and king of the great orcish race, he who had become a king above kings, Great King Dif Gogun, was in agony.

Normally, the great king resided in Gashuoral (the father city), built next to Dohats Amo (the mother river) which flowed through Guado (the plains of mold) between the Nehi Desert and the Enno Zadd Mountains. However, Dif Gogun was now staying in Grozdendahl (the city of battle cries) over Lake Gandah, north of the Bordo Plains—the city which had once been known as Rodekia, capital of the human kingdom of Arabakia.

In this white stone city, Dif Gogun had gathered the orcish clans, the gray elves of the Broken Valley, and the undead who did not want to follow King Ishi—who was also called Ishidua Rohro—or the self-styled “Archduke” Deres Pain, and organized them into the Ogudon (Southern Expedition). He’d thought he might lead them personally but had ultimately entrusted the task to his right hand, Wago Groa.

Rodekia had been put to the torch by the Alliance of Kings and left in ruins for a time. Later, orcish and undead stonemasons and carpenters spent decades rebuilding, and the city was reborn as Grozdendahl. Then there was Wehagoran (swan palace), which was still as beautiful as it had been during the height of Rodekia’s glory days. Taking a liking to the castle, Dif Gogun had chosen it as the rear base of the Ogudon, where he would wait to hear word of their success.

Yesterday, an orc had rushed into Wehagoran.

This envoy had claimed to be carrying a message from Wago Groa, the commander-in-chief of the Ogudon, but refused to divulge it when he met with the castle keeper. He was under strict orders to deliver it directly to the great king and said he could tell no other. When Great King Dif Gogun heard about this from the castle keeper, he ordered that the envoy be brought to his royal quarters at once.

The envoy was of average height for an orc, but his lower half was overdeveloped. Apparently, he'd walked the more than fifty vec (roughly 150 kilometers) from the foothills of the Kurogane Mountain Range almost without rest. Distance aside, the route was full of dangerous places, like the sea of trees or the Bordo Plains, where the dead who cannot die roam, so it was an impressive feat. He was skilled in one task and tight-lipped. His hair was undyed, and even though he stood before the great king, he had not changed out of his traveling attire. Just the kind of orc Wago Groa was fond of.

The Groa clan had once been a minor faction, beneath anyone's notice. However, once Wago became their leader, they grew explosively.

It was rare to see an orc as unimpressive as Wago. He wasn't particularly small or scrawny, yet his appearance was awfully shabby. He had a slack jaw and a far-off look in his eyes. An orc who seemed to be that weak and stupid surely had to be powerless and devoid of worth. Anyone would make that assumption if they didn't know what Wago was truly like.

The fact was, Wago Groa was incredibly sharp. Not just observant, but unexpectedly skilled too.

Dif Gogun had vivid memories of the day he'd first met Wago.

They were both chiefs of their clans, but back then, Dif had yet to be recognized as the king of his race. The famous Gogun clan, and the insignificant Groa clan. Though their clans were on completely different scales, they were technically considered equals. Most of the time in a situation like that, they would begin to compete out of a sense of vanity and pride. Wago was different. He maintained perfect decorum, going through all the formalities with a breathtaking degree of courtesy. Then, when they finally stood face-to-face, Wago knelt before Dif and deeply bowed his head. It was a gesture of vassalage.

"We both lead clans, do we not? I may be your senior, Sir Wago Groa, but not by many years. Please, raise your head."

"No, Lord Dif Gogun. I believe that not only will you unify the orc clans, but one day you will be a truly great king, a sovereign over all the races. I have come in the hopes of working for you, even as the lowliest servant in your camp."

Wago Groa wasn't all talk. That orc, with his terribly unimpressive appearance, would offer to do any sort of dirty work that needed to be done. And he wouldn't leave it to his men. No, he'd carry out the task himself. When there was a job that, for whatever reason, Dif Gogun could not order himself, Wago would pick up on it and take matters into his own hands.

Wago was also a progressive sort, completely divorced from the orcs' obsession with bloodlines, which could have been considered a disease on their society. At this point, the Groa clan could hardly be called a clan at all. Wago welcomed misfits from other clans to take on the Groa name. If they did something to distinguish themselves, then even gumows (mixed bloods) could gain his patronage. Under his guidance, the Groa clan had suddenly grown to become large and influential. The conservative orcs of the old order hated him, but none had the stones to openly criticize the terrifying Wago Groa now.

Dif Gogun had braced himself before hearing the Groa envoy's message. He knew it would be bad news. Something must have gone seriously wrong.

The Ogudon's results in battle had been stunning so far. They'd put the Shadow Forest—home of the haughty elves—to the torch, and then they had taken Alterna from the miserable humans. Next, they would destroy the dwarves' Ironblood Kingdom and return in triumph to Grozdendahl, where the great king awaited them.

Had the dwarves bested them, then? That hideous race whose stocky bodies were built like steel drums with beards was not to be underestimated. Dif Gogun knew they were deadly foes. That said, if the Ogudon had been defeated, it might have been because Jumbo and Forgan had turned on them at a critical moment. Forgan was a double-edged sword. If they had betrayed him, he would have to kill the hostages, but that would force an all-out confrontation.

However, the envoy's report was beyond anything Dif Gogun had imagined.

Whenever something surprised him too badly, Dif tended to fly into a rage. Ten years ago, would he even have been able to listen to the end? He had managed to restrain himself until then because he was the great king, but the next thing he knew, he was throwing a chair at the wall. He wished he'd driven

the envoy from the room first, but he didn't even remotely regret jumping on his bed until it broke, or smashing his dresser. When he got this mad, taking it out on nearby objects was the best thing to do.

From the moment of his birth, it had already been decided that Dif Gogun would be chief of his clan one day. Even if he had been a total dunce, so long as he lived until his father died, he would have been able to succeed him. His blood had sealed his fate.

The orcs loved swords as a symbol of martial prowess, but the children of the Gogun clan were given hand axes the moment they were old enough to hold things and were made to spar with their parents and siblings. It was also a Gogun clan tradition to train all but those with poor eyesight to use a bow. They valued patience, careful consideration, and, above all, decorum. The Gogun clan had the respect of all the other clans, and they had a reputation for being trustworthy.

But Dif, the heir, was prone to tantrums.

"To think that this is how my eldest son would turn out. I've shamed our ancestors. I can't die with things like this."

His father's lamentations only fueled Dif's anger. It wasn't just his uncles, cousins, and siblings that Dif beat up. He had even struck his own father in the face, getting into fights where they wrestled with one another.

"The Gogun clan is finished. Our blood is so old it has grown stagnant, corrupted. And you are the result. I won't claim it is any sin of yours. This is my own fault, producing such a terrible child as you."

Then die.

Just bite the dust already.

No matter how many times Dif picked a fight with him, his father would just keep uttering lame complaints, never seeking to get back at his son. The Gogun clan saw that as a virtue, but Dif thought it was shit. The son's hatred for his father grew, and the father endured his son's violence. You might say his current temperament was a result of that.

As he grew up, Dif had learned how to vent his violent emotions. He'd also

figured out that his excessive outbursts made others fear and shrink away from him. Early on, he'd noticed that his feelings messed with his thinking and were nothing but a hindrance to him. So he screamed. Cried. Thrashed around. Experience had taught him that doing these things would diffuse his irrepressible passions, cooling his head and letting him think clearly once more.

For the past two days, in addition to occasionally taking care of the various tasks that fell to him as great king, Dif had gone about smashing things in his room, cursing loudly, and roaming all around Wehagoran. He was thinking. He'd eaten twice, but not slept at all in that time. They said the No-Life King had shown himself. Who had time to sleep after hearing that?

The No-Life King was supposed to have died more than a century ago.

Obviously, Dif Gogun didn't believe that sort of baseless gossip.

The No-Life King, who was supposedly undying, had had his soul shattered by an unknown poison. This was the story people told as if it were true, so the rumor had come to be the dominant theory of what happened, but it had almost certainly been concocted by one of his treasonous friends. In other words, one of the five princes to whom the No-Life King had granted bodies that never aged. Either King Ishi, who was also known as Ishidua Rohro, or perhaps Archduke Deres Pain. It had to be one of them.

The gray elves of the Broken Valley were the ones who had ended up taking the fall for murdering the No-Life King. It was hard to imagine them having any motive to kill him. What could they have had to gain from his death? But they were elves, same as those in the Shadow Forest. Elves were twisted, rotten creatures at heart. Those prideful, treacherous, blackhearted bastards were no strangers to stabbing people in the back. Nobody could say for certain that they were the ones who had done it, but neither would anyone put it past them. That was the general consensus among the undead and orcs at the time.

Ultimately, the gray elves had returned to the Broken Valley and cut off communication with the other races for decades. In their minds, they were paying their respects to the No-Life King with their silence and protesting the accusations against them, but the other races hadn't taken it that way. See? It really was them. They wouldn't slink off quietly like that otherwise.

The various races—orcs, gray elves, goblins, kobolds, and so on—had not joined hands in mutual understanding, bound by an enduring friendship. The mystical and extraordinary No-Life King had overwhelmed all of them, becoming an irresistible magnet that pulled them all together.

After becoming the great king, Dif Gogun had gathered knowledgeable orcs he called bauhazzos (story-tellers) and then put them to work deciphering the legends of their clans. They'd investigated ruins in various locations, even reading the records left behind by humans as they traced the story of their past. Dif sought to become the king of all races. In order to make that a reality, he needed to verify the great feat the No-Life King had achieved in forming the Alliance of Kings. He also had to learn each race's origins and culture, digging into their natures and tendencies as well.

At one point in time, the elves had ruled the plains and forests of Grimgar. They never interacted with the dwarves, who were people of the mountains. The areas they lived in didn't overlap with those of the gnomes, goblins, kobolds, or centaurs either. Then, suddenly, humans and orcs had appeared and rapidly filled the domain of the elves.

There were a number of stories that said humans and orcs had come from the Red Continent, crossing the seas or perhaps drifting here. According to the bauhazzos' research, this could also be interpreted as them having come from another world.

Whatever the case, around the same time, two gods the humans referred to as the God of Light, Lumiaris, and the Dark God, Skullhell, appeared in Grimgar, and an age of struggle between them began.

These gods were absolute, supernatural beings that held sway over the land and even the very heavens. The various races hadn't so much chosen to side with one of the two factions as they had been forced to serve them. Faced with actual gods, they'd had no other choice.

It was still unclear how the battle between Lumiaris and Skullhell had ended. But regardless, they'd both vanished. That much was certain. The gods weren't dead, however. This was proven by the fact that humans who served one or the other could still draw upon a small fraction of their power.

The gods had left, and the time of humans came.

The humans were good at banding together and formed societies that were more advanced than those of any of the other races. Human nations like Arabakia, Nananka, Ishmar, and Kuzen competed with one another, sometimes coming into conflict but never fully severing ties as they ruled over the fertile central plains of Grimgar. The elves were driven deep into the forests, the dwarves into the mountains, the gnomes underground, the goblins and kobolds into untamed lands, the centaurs to the Quickwind Plains, and the orcs to the Nehi Desert, Tomorazzo (the plateau of falling ash), Guado, and other inhospitable lands.

What was the decisive factor that separated humans from the other races? Dif Gogun had had the bauhazzos debate and had also thought on the matter himself.

Currently, their conclusion was that it was writing. The human race had already had a written language when they arrived in Grimgar. None of the other races had developed one before then. His own people, the orcs, as well as the elves and dwarves, had been using methods of representing numbers with knots in a rope or scars in their flesh, and they'd had drawings representing the sun or water for a long time before that, of course. However, humans were the ones who had invented a system of symbols to represent words or perhaps discovered an existing one and put it into use.

Elves and dwarves had mimicked the humans in adopting writing. The orcs, however, had believed the humans' written characters to be nothing more than cursed symbols until the No-Life King had suggested they install a king who would rule their race.

In truth, the script used to write the orcish language still had many shortcomings and led to a lot of confusion. Dif Gogun had set himself the task of moving things forward on this front and bringing their writing up to the same level as human script. To that end, he had established the Amogodo (language academy) and selected a capable bauhazzo to serve as dorbo (headmaster) there. Though he would never say so openly, Dif was well aware that orcish culture was still developing.

The kingdoms of the human race had clearly been more advanced, and that was why they had stood above the rest. The elves, who couldn't face that reality, doubled down on their treacherous nature, fighting among themselves and driving many of their own out of the forests. The dwarves drank their sorrows away, putting their blood and sweat into digging holes in the ground so they could forget their own stupidity. The gnomes concealed themselves in the belly of the earth. The goblins and kobolds were treated like barbarian tribes, and they roamed the land idly, unable to do anything. The centaurs ran around the fields, and as long as they were able to do that, their tiny egos remained unbruised.

The No-Life King had changed everything.

Dif Gogun had to learn what he could from the No-Life King's example. He felt he knew far more about his predecessor than most. And yet, much about the man remained a mystery to him. Far too much.

The No-Life King had been around until a little over a century ago, so there were still people in the world who had known him personally. The five princes, first of all. Dif was acquainted with four of the five: King Ishi, AKA Ishidua Rohro, Archduke Deres Pain, Gyabigo the Dragon Hunter, and Architekra. Yet all four adamantly refused to speak about the No-Life King.

Some among the long-lived elves of the Broken Valley claimed to have had audiences with the No-Life King, so he'd had his baughazzos interview them. But everything they'd said was inscrutable. The No-Life King was tall, and they claimed they hadn't been able to make out his face even when they looked up at him. He was said to have engaged in friendly conversation with anyone, regardless of their race or social status, and yet, despite this, it proved hard to find stories that gave any clue as to his character.

The No-Life King had reportedly remained unfazed in the face of ten thousand arrows fired by a great army from the Kingdom of Ishmar. With a single swing of his staff, he had made the ground itself tremble, and he had broken the main force of the Kingdom of Nananka. In the invasion of the Kingdom of Arabakia, he had led an army of undead into battle, known as the Terrors—because they taught their enemies the true meaning of fear, while having none of their own. The No-Life King had won every single battle where he'd been the commander.

Even if his allies were losing, the No-Life King would bring in reinforcements and quickly turn the tide.

There were no concrete records.

It was all hearsay.

The more he investigated, the more Dif became suspicious.

Did the No-Life King exist at all?

Well, he was certain there had been someone *called* the No-Life King, and that he had greatly changed the history of Grimgar. The man had left his mark. The evidence of it was everywhere. But was the No-Life King really the kind of figure that they'd all heard of and imagined him to be? Had their image of him been warped into something completely different from what he was really like? Perhaps because his achievements were so great, people had developed a glorified image of him. After all, they'd lacked the ability to keep proper written records a century ago. The foundation had not yet been laid for the precise transmission of facts. People probably hadn't realized the importance of communicating things exactly as they had happened for the sake of later generations.

On the other hand, Dif had another thought.

The mystical and extraordinary No-Life King who had been so overwhelming might have been another of those absolute, supernatural beings of a different sort. He'd appeared in Grimgar, changed history, and then—while it was still unclear how or why—he'd disappeared. Wasn't that just like those other stories? Could it not be said that the lingering traces of the No-Life King were similar to those left by the gods Lumiaris and Skullhell?

Setting aside the issue of whether he was a god himself, the No-Life King might have been a god-like being.

In the same way that Lumiaris and Skullhell's power still affected Grimgar after their departure, the No-Life King still cast his shadow over the world of the living through an abominable curse that caused darkness to imbue the dead with souls that were barely worth the name. Centuries from now, people might speak of the No-Life King as another god. Maybe there had been stories around

Lumiaris and Skullhell like there were about the No-Life King.

The No-Life King, like the undying gods, was not dead at all. He'd simply left Grimgar, like the God of Light and the Dark God before him. Dif Gogun had been thinking of the No-Life King as a historical figure, but that had been a mistake. He was from prehistoric times. A mythical being, you might say.

The No-Life King would return one day. Everyone had heard someone say something to that effect at some point. Dif Gogun had heard it so often as a child that he'd grown sick of it, but did people honestly believe that? The No-Life King had given rise to the undead and had made the orcs the most powerful faction in the world. The humans had crawled away to the southern frontier, the elves to their dark forests, and the dwarves to their stinking holes, all of them unable to do anything but bide their time. The Alliance of Kings had essentially fallen apart, but Grimgar was practically a paradise compared to a century ago. There was room for development and improvement still, but no need for the No-Life King to show himself.

This is our time.

After a full day spent racking his brain without consulting anyone else, even the bauhazzos, Dif Gogun ordered a zauba (page) to clean up the furniture he had destroyed in his room, then called his magoh (concubine) to help make him presentable. Dif had three magohs in addition to his wife and had brought one of them, Pakyani, with him to Wehagoran. Pakyani of the Odoha clan had glossy hair dyed green and yellow, and was rather tall. She had square shoulders, a long neck, large breasts, and wide hips. She was just the kind of woman that Dif liked.

Dif stood before the mirror as Pakyani briskly stripped him out of his clothes and began combing his hair. By Gogun clan custom, Dif's hair was dyed in the colors red and blue. Watching the fluid motions of Pakyani's nimble hands as she trimmed his eyebrows and beard excited Dif's passions. However, now was not the time for sexual release.

Pakyani helped Dif into an orange robe, a black kagata (long jacket), and a red, white, and blue mugassadoi (three-colored overcoat). The lustrous belt of his robe held his sword on the right and the traditional hand ax of the Gogun

clan on the left. Pakyani was tall, so she could place the golden crown of the great king on his head without him having to bend over for her. The rings on all ten of his fingers and the bracelets on his arms served as both weapons—making his punches more damaging, if necessary—and armor.

Once Dif left his room and Pakyani behind, he ordered a zauba to summon the bauhazzos at once. By the time Dif reached the royal conference room that they called the tonak (curtain room), the seven bauhazzos who had accompanied him to Wehagoran were all seated on gyavs (silk cushions) with their legs crossed.

“We’ve received a report from Wago Groa,” Dif started saying after he had laid his sword on the floor and stacked up two gyavs to sit on. “The Ogudon successfully invaded the Ironblood Kingdom, and Forgan slew the Iron King and her entourage as they fled... However, a human woman calling herself the No-Life King appeared and used an unknown technique that drew strange black monsters to her, forcing a temporary retreat.”

The seven bauhazzos, ranging in age from young to old, all gulped, none of them venturing to speak.

Dif gave them all of the information the envoy had provided.

Forgan had encountered the woman calling herself the No-Life King before. It seemed she was a volunteer soldier from Alterna. But she had spoken the name of the founding king of Arabakia, Enad George, and bizarrely claimed that she was Enad, and Enad was her.

Additionally, the human woman who called herself the No-Life King had revived two humans, a man and a woman presumed to be volunteer soldiers, whom Forgan had killed.

It was unclear what the black monsters were, but they were believed to have been summoned by the human woman calling herself the No-Life King, and they had started coming from all directions without end.

While there was no confirmation, it seemed likely that the human woman who called herself the No-Life King had gone back to the Ironblood Kingdom, because wherever the black monsters were coming from, they were gathering there.

“She revived humans...” The eldest bauhazzo finally spoke after some time. “If that really is true, it is no less than the act of a god—no, even Lumiaris cannot return the dead to life. But if she truly is *him*...”

Before Dif could get angry and start shouting, one of the other bauhazzos yelled, “Stop beating around the bush!”

A fierce debate commenced. Dif remained silent and listened.

“For starters, there has been no shortage of people predicting *his* second coming...”

“The undead, in particular, claim *he* will return any time now...”

“Those prophecies are nonsense. But there are signs...”

“For several years, King Ishi hasn’t set foot outside of his stronghold, Undead DC.”

“Some say *his* remains lie in the royal chambers of Castle Everest...”

“Damn King Ishi. He’s never allowed envoys of the great king to even enter Everest.”

“Isn’t the birth of the undead a mystery to begin with? The very idea that *he* created them may be false...”

“Their numbers have grown, not shrunk, since *he* disappeared, after all.”

“We’ve tried to probe them in every way we can, and we’re still unable to figure out what’s going on inside the undead capital...”

“Some of the undead are starting to distrust their leaders too.”

“There are those who choose to side with His Majesty as a result, so it is something of a mixed blessing for our side, but still...”

“The undead are not a monolith. I hear that King Ishi and the Archduke refuse to even meet one another...”

“Even so, while we can set Gyabigo aside, since he’s just wasting time hunting ice dragons up north, it’s worrying that we have no idea what Architekra is doing...”

“They say that Ainrand Leslie is protecting *his* soul.”

“Then...”

“*He* cannot have been killed. There is no way to destroy an undying soul...”

“But the soul was carried off by someone, and they’re protecting it...”

“Ainrand Leslie...”

“They say that after dying once, the five princes were reborn through a miracle *he* performed and became *his* loyal vassals...”

“King Ishi...”

“Apparently, Ishidua Rohro is a descendant of Ishidua Zaemoon, who tried to assassinate Enad George, the founding king of Arabakia, to seize power.”

“He was originally human...”

“Originally, yes. He was reborn through *his* power, turned into a loyal servant.”

“Wait, the woman who claims *his* name...”

“She said she is Enad, and Enad is her...”

“If she speaks the truth, then *his* identity is...”

“The founding king of Arabakia.”

“Enad George...”

“A human...”

“The human king gained supernatural powers somehow, and then reemerged as *him*...”

“Then *he* united the races, including us orcs, and proceeded to destroy all the human kingdoms, starting with Arabakia.”

“If that’s true...”

“Revenge...”

“A single human gained great power, and used it to take revenge on his own kind who had betrayed him...”

“We were used—is that what you’re saying, then?”

“But if not for *his* great deeds, we orcs wouldn’t be where we are now.”

“No, we’re no less intelligent than the humans are, on average. And it goes without saying that our bodies are stronger and tougher than theirs. Eventually, we orcs would have emerged from Guado, Tomorazzo, and the Nehi Desert to seize land from the humans.”

“You can only say that because you don’t know what kind of lives we lived there.”

“Our people struggled to even keep themselves fed. Even our current preoccupation with blood ties is something we developed to get us through those harsh times...”

“Had *he* not traveled across Tomorazzo, Guado, and the Nehi Desert all alone, calling out to us, taking our hands, and inviting us to rise up with him, we orcs would still be there...”

“Without *him*, we orcs wouldn’t be where we are today...”

“Even if *he* was a human...”

“If the No-Life King was human,” Dif Gogun said in a grave tone, silencing all the bauhazzos, “that would be no mark against the greatness of his deeds. Now, we have a human woman who claims to be the No-Life King, and if she can demonstrate supernatural powers, some may submit to her. Their numbers will not be small. The undead would serve her unconditionally. What of the gray elves? They were accused of a crime they didn’t commit and ran away to grumble about their misfortune. But originally, they returned to the Broken Valley out of sorrow for the No-Life King. They were mourning him in their own way. They never reveal their true intentions. They are born traitors. And yet, they likely had a degree of loyalty to the No-Life King.”

Dif had welcomed the gray elves with open arms. He had met with the king of the Broken Valley, Zwarzfeld, a number of times, and let the king’s childhood friend, Melderheid, join the Ogudon as one of its lieutenant generals. Still, that didn’t mean the gray elves had submitted to him. At best, you could say they were allies who, for the time being, shared a common interest.

Obviously, Melderheid would also be aware that the No-Life King had

returned. He'd no doubt report that back to King Zwarzfeld in secret. How would the Broken Valley react? If it came to a point where he had to choose between Great King Dif Gogun and the No-Life King, who would the gray elf king side with? Would he think it was better to stick with the great king of the orcs?

"What of our own race? Between me, Dif Gogun, and the No-Life King, who will the orcs see as more important?"

The seven bauhazzos were speechless. Some of them awkwardly lowered their eyes, blinking repeatedly, while others were outright clutching their heads. Had Dif not spent a whole day thinking about this, he'd probably have lost it and gone on a rampage at this point.

As the cursed child of the Gogun clan who'd still had to lead them as their chief, as one who detested the traditions of the clan system for how illogical they were, as one who worried for the future of his race, as a man of ambition, and as an idealist, Dif needed to look at this situation with a calculating eye and come to a rational decision.

"With all due respect..." The eldest bauhazzo focused his dull eyes on the great king, speaking in a tone that was a little hard to hear. "We could never think of betraying you, sire, but I cannot help but suspect that some would turn their hearts toward *him*—the No-Life King. So, while I hesitate to say it...I cannot deny there would be those who might feign loyalty to you while betraying you in secret... This is, of course, not because of any fault of yours, sire, no, certainly not, but because—"

"Enough!" Dif let out a sigh. The blood had rushed to his head for an instant, but he'd managed to restrain himself just in time.

"I will divide the Ogudon into two groups, the main force and a detachment. The main force, led by Wago Groa, will remain in the foothills of the Kurogane Mountain Range, monitoring the No-Life King and looking for an opportunity to make contact. Forgan and Zan Dogran will remain with Wago. Forgan are a valuable asset so long as they don't betray us. As for Zan Dogran, I want to see how loyal he really is. The detachment will be led by Lieutenant General Maga Odoha, and they will return to Grozdendahl with Melderheid. If Wago Groa makes a request for reinforcements, I will consider it."

The bauhazzos slapped their thighs with both hands, signaling they had no objection.

Dif gave a satisfied nod, but internally he could feel waves starting to form on the sea of his emotions. “There’s a number of clans we’re going to have to watch closely, as well as the gray elves.”

Assuming the No-Life King was a god-like being, Dif Gogun had meant to take advantage of the legends surrounding him. The orc might not have been able to take the No-Life King’s place, but the great king could follow in his footsteps, emulating him where it made sense to and changing things where it didn’t. The Alliance of Kings that the No-Life King had championed would be useful.

Obviously, what Dif was really aiming for was the hegemony of the orcs, by the orcs, and for the orcs. However, the concept of what constituted an orc could be expanded. At his most extreme, he had even considered that it might be possible to do away with the boundaries of race. People could be divided so that those who agreed with him and shared his ideals were orcs and everyone else wasn’t. It would be incredibly difficult to make that a reality, but if he could push things that far, the name Dif Gogun would stand alongside that of the No-Life King in the history of Grimgar, or perhaps even surpass it.

But the No-Life King did not live merely in myths and legends. If they lived in the same era, then the two of them would have to face one another eventually.

Would Dif Gogun kneel before the No-Life King when that time came? Or would it be the other way around? He couldn’t tell just yet.

0111A660. Don't Be Afraid, You Coward

“Fwehhhhhyahahhh...!” What had started out as a breath turned into a sigh, and then a strange shout that Kikkawa used to motivate himself.

But, like, honestly, everything had gone nuts, and his head was ninety percent preoccupied with a sense of impending danger.

“Kicker!” Tada, whom he liked to call Tadacchi, shouted at him angrily.

Who's Kicker? I'm Kikkawa, man. But, yeah, I guess you're right, it's no time for staring into space, huh? Things are totally whack here. Uh, what's 'whack' mean again? Kikkawa thought as he smoothly climbed up the steps and shield-bashed one of those strange black creatures with a shout of exertion.

He'd have loved to be able to say it gave the thing pause, but that wasn't how these guys played. The strike *did* push it back a little, though. Then he shouted and kicked it with a “Woo!” Swords didn't work—you couldn't cut them—so, with a “Hoo!” he smacked it with the flat of his blade instead. That forced the thing down a couple steps, but another came sliding up the stairs from behind it right away, so the fight would never end.

“Slash!”

Tall Mimori raced past Kikkawa on the right, smacking one of the black creatures with her longsword. Naturally, she was clobbering them with the flat of her blade too. Despite being a mage, and a female mage at that, Mimori had some serious arm strength. Kikkawa was going to start tearing up over how inadequate she made him feel. But at the same time, he was impressed. Mimori wasn't just a powerhouse. If she had been all brawn and no brains, she wouldn't have been able to dual-wield—no, double-up on swords—the way that she did. Double-up on swords? Wasn't saying dual-wield good enough? Well, whatever, Mimori boldly swung her two swords, sending an enemy flying and even taking the one coming up from behind it along for the ride.

“*I love you! Nice! Yeah...!*” Anna-san shouted from up above, providing

perfectly-timed encouragement. You couldn't deny she was a big part of the reason the Tokkis could, like, keep on trying as hard as they did. Because she totally was.

Anna-san had been keeping up support magic like Protection and Assist until a little while ago, but she needed to heal them too, so it was getting hard on her. The source of magic was a mage's magic power, which was a sort of spiritual energy. Basically, magic was kind of like a test of endurance. If Anna-san got worn out and collapsed on them, the Tokkis wouldn't be the Tokkis anymore. That was why they wanted her to rest as much as she could, and everyone would hold out while she cheered them on.



“Gotta stay buff...”

Strange words came out of Kikkawa’s mouth. He’d meant to say “stay tough,” but it came out wrong. Oh, and super quiet too. He almost doubted it was his own voice.

Mimori tried to take another swing with her two longswords but stumbled and fell against the staircase wall.

Oh, yeah, of course that’d happen, thought Kikkawa.

Mimori-san’s totally bushed.

Like, how could she not be?

It’s up to me. This is my time to shine, isn’t it? Mimori-san’s out there covering for me. She moved to the back a while ago because she was totally winded, but she came up front again to help me. Now it’s my turn to step up.

His thoughts raced, but his body did nothing to obey them. Even on sad nights, when he was wrapped in cold shame over how pathetic he was, he couldn’t shed a single tear.

Why?

Kikkawa wanted to cry.

Come on, man, be a hero. Now’s your moment. It’s gotta be. What’re you gonna do if not become a hero?

“Move, move, moooove!” Even without Tada shouting for him to step aside, Kikkawa knew.

It’s not. It’s really not.

It just isn’t.

Isn’t what?

Isn’t my time. I’m the wrong guy for this.

Kikkawa wasn’t a hero, and he couldn’t become one. Guys like Kikkawa couldn’t unleash their power while on the edge.

Nah, I want to, y’know?

I do, okay?

I want to. I wanna let loose.

I want to unleash everything I've got, I do, but I can't...

But it wasn't just that; it was that he'd run into a thick wall. When the time came to rouse himself to action, he couldn't put it all out there and really show his stuff, because, well, he had no stuff to show.

No power.

No talent.

No potential.

The kind of guy who could become a hero had something fundamentally different about them. The way Kikkawa saw it, maybe it wasn't the sort of thing you could change through hard work. Because Kikkawa had worked as hard as anyone, probably harder, though he'd have been embarrassed to admit it. There were walls you couldn't climb over or smash through with hard work alone.

Basically, a hero was born a hero. They became one because they were always meant to be. They were blessed with the capacity for being a hero. Like, when an ordinary person had given their all, had nothing left, and was running on empty, then that would be it for them, but a hero? Not so much.

They kept on going. They still had more to give.

Like, the lake had run dry, but somehow a spring welled up. Not just welled up—it erupted forth.

“Eloim, Essaim, I seek and beseech theeeeeee...!”

Tada was shouting some nonsense as he came rolling down the stairs. Kikkawa quickly made way, pushing himself against the wall. A moment later, he was overcome with a wave of despair.

What the hell? What the absolute hell?! It does move. My body can do what I tell it to. I've still got strength left. So uncool!

Tada rolled down the stairs past Kikkawa, and then past Mimori, plunging toward the strange black creatures. You could maybe have described them as

dudes in full-body tights that were completely black, without a hint of glossiness. But it was clear that they weren't human. They weren't stiff, but they weren't soft either. More springy. They had a sense of weight to them, but they weren't hard like rock. You couldn't cut them or break them. Though he'd say they were humanoid, there were just two arms and two legs growing out of a torso that narrowed toward the bottom. They didn't have a head, or anything resembling hands or feet.

"Tsagahtoreah...!"

Tada body-slammed the black creatures as they tried to make their way up a narrow stairway that couldn't have been more than a couple meters across. No, that wasn't it. He'd rolled down the stairs, ending up on his feet in front of the enemy when he was almost close enough to touch them, then let loose with the warhammer he'd been hugging close to his body and sent them flying. It was a trick only Tada could have pulled off. He was truly one of a kind.

If you'd asked Kikkawa, he'd have said, *That's inhuman.*

Normal people couldn't do stuff like that.

Hmm? Normal?

No, no, no, no.

Even if they were abnormal, there was no way to do that.

"Nnahahh! Boitreh! Mackerehl! Vinegared mackerehhhl!"

Each swing of Tada's warhammer knocked an enemy down. He wasn't just hitting them, though. Tada's warhammer also collided with the walls and stairs, sending smashed bits of masonry flying.

Wow! Ciao! Er, no, ciao's something else, huh? Awesome!

Was it okay for Kikkawa to just look on all impressed like this?

No, of course not.

Tada fought with a warhammer. He was a hammer-lover, a hammer-master, but had changed classes to become a priest. Why? Because rather than cause trouble for Anna-san every time he got hurt, it was easier if he could fix himself up. Tada had become a priest so he could go totally wild, swinging a

warhammer to his heart's content.

That said, Tada wasn't all that big of a guy. He looked incredible without his clothes on, sure. Like, muscles everywhere. But he wasn't actually a fighter who relied on strength. Kikkawa had seen Tada like this before, dripping with sweat, swinging his warhammer around awfully slow. But with swing after swing, he gradually picked up speed.

Tada had considered every possible situation that could happen on the battlefield and had come up with techniques to deal with them, which he'd practiced and refined to perfection. The way his warhammer moved, the recoil, his body had absorbed all of it. You could say the warhammer was a part of him. Or rather, Tada was the warhammer, and the warhammer was Tada.

"Kwahadah...! Swohrdfeesh...! Cohnger eeeel...! Eeegg...!"

Now Tada was losing control. Once he started swinging, he couldn't stop. That was why he would hit the walls and stairs to stop himself. He had no other choice. The warhammer could have slipped out of his hands at any moment. Now, this was Tada. So long as he had his warhammer, he'd keep swinging until his last breath. But if he lost the all-important hammer, then what? He would probably try to keep on swinging it anyway.

Barehanded.

Kikkawa imagined Tada doing practice swings without his warhammer, making a face like a fierce devil.

"Tadacchi...! Tada-saaan...!"

Kikkawa tried to descend the steps, but he slipped.

Seriously? he thought.

I don't care if I can't become a hero, so long as I can just hold out here a little longer.

Is that not possible? Am I such a loser I can't even manage that?

Wow, it's almost like I'm trash. Nah, forget "almost."

I'm just trash.

The definitive edition of trash.

“Demon...!”

At that moment, a sinister wind blew past, pushing the trash named Kikkawa to the side.

The sinister wind had a ponytail.

Wait, that's Inui.

Inui raced past, a ponytail that had increasingly more gray hairs in it lately flapping about behind him.

“Hold on, you’ve been MIA for a while now, Inui...”

Kikkawa was taken aback. Not that this was anything new, though. It was a common occurrence in the Tokkis for Inui to up and disappear without a word to anyone. Who knew what nonsense he’d pull now that he was back.

“Hyah!” Inui cried as he grabbed Tada by the collar.

“Gweh!” Tada sputtered, almost choking. He’d been in the middle of a full swing of his warhammer, only for it to rebound off the wall, nearly falling out of his hands. But this was Tada. He’d never let go of his warhammer.

“Well done!”

Whose voice was that?

No, it went without saying. The man came dancing down the stairs, past Inui who was currently dragging Tada away.

“Whoa! Whuh? No way! You can move already?!” Kikkawa was shocked to the core.

Did the man have no limits? His strenuous efforts were the reason the Tokkis had managed to hold out this long. He’d sweated the most out of everyone present. Shed blood, even. Despite his many wounds, he had stood on the front line longer than any of them, protecting his comrades with his life.

“I can’t hold out any longer, let me rest a little,” he’d said. Up until then, aside from when his wounds were being healed, he’d said he was resting while he fought, like he was sleeping on his feet, so no matter how impressive he was, he

had to be at his limit.

When he'd pulled back, Kikkawa had prepared for the worst. There was no way the man was going to retreat from the front for a breather, then get right back into the action. They were going to have to hold on without him for a while.

Tadacchi's not looking so good, Mimori-san's in pretty bad shape, and Inui's nowhere to be seen, so I've gotta step up, he'd thought.

In the end, though, he couldn't.

It was too great a burden for Kikkawa.

Well, what can you do? he thought meekly.

Now that the man, Tokimune, had reappeared, this place wasn't the stairs in the ninth tower out of fourteen at Riverside Iron Fortress anymore. It was a stage prepared just for him.

"Okay, are you ready?!"

Tokimune was a paladin of Lumiaris, so he had light magic. He had probably cast Trance on himself, the effect of which made him braver and more robust. He'd also cast Luminous to make his shield glow. Not every paladin could become like Tokimune, though. No, not a chance.

Tokimune wasn't just fast, he was so light on his feet he appeared weightless. He closed in on the black creatures, going, "Hey...!" and not so much bashing one of them with his shield as pushing it aside. When he did, it was lifted into the air and sent flying. By that point, Tokimune was already on the next one, pushing his shield into it with another "Hey!" It looked like a light tap, and the sound it made wasn't a loud bashing, but something heavier. What in the world was he doing? Kikkawa didn't know, but he was probably using his shield with the perfect angle and power at the exact right time. It wasn't just the shield either. Tokimune twirled his longsword with a "Hey! Hey!" pushing the enemy back like he was scooping them up.

It's zero-G, thought Kikkawa.

Okay, no, it probably wasn't, but he seemed to be ignoring gravity. Tokimune

shifted his feet around rapidly, adjusting his position.

It's like he's teleporting.

"Hey! Hey! He-he-hey! He-he-hey! He-he-he-heyyyy...!"

"It's Tokimune's one-man show..."

Kikkawa couldn't help but laugh. He laughed so hard he cried—yeah, no. No matter what, he wasn't going to laugh that hard. So why was Kikkawa tearing up, then?

Am I feeling moved?

That was Kikkawa's first thought. Among the Tokkis, Tokimune was the main attraction. He was their leader, of course, and charismatic too. It was like he was everyone's dad. He was a super paladin, a real hero. Kikkawa was being struck once again by what an absolute star the man was.

Is that it?

"Mimori, Kikkawa! We're pulling back for now! Can you move?!" Tokimune shouted, his hands never stopping as he pushed the black creatures back with his longsword and shield. Actually, it wasn't just his hands, his whole body was getting in on the action.

"Uhkay!" Mimori turned to go immediately. She looked pretty sluggish, but still managed to move somehow. *Am I one to talk?* Kikkawa mentally chastised himself as he started making his way up the stairs.

"Gotcha! Roger! Aye, aye, sir!" Kikkawa tried to respond with as much cheer as he could muster. Being bright and optimistic, ultra happy and super positive. That was what Kikkawa had going for him. Because, in all honesty, he had nothing else. He didn't need a heart full of passion now, he needed nerves of steel. It was time to go, go, go.

But why, despite that, were the tears refusing to stop?

Kikkawa caught up to Mimori in no time. When she looked to the side and saw him, her eyes bugged out. They seemed so big it was unreal in the lantern light inside the tower.

"You okay?!" she asked.

“Healthy as Helsinki!” Kikkawa instantly replied with a beaming smile.

What’s a Helsinki? he wondered. *I’m crying, aren’t I? Crying and smiling at the same time is pretty gross, huh? Yeah, it is. So gross. Totally yucky.*

Become nothing, Kikkawa willed himself. He didn’t want to think. Didn’t want to feel. Nothingness was good. He wanted to become nothing.

They climbed the stairs, with Mimori ahead of Kikkawa. She could have left him behind. But she wouldn’t. She must’ve been worried for him. He wouldn’t have expected that. Mimori was tall, so she felt like a big sister in that way, but her personality was more little-sister-y.

After some time climbing, they saw what looked like a landing. There was a door that led out into a corridor there. The fourteen towers of Riverside Iron Fortress were connected by bridges. Well, they called them bridges, but they had roofs over them, so they were more like skyways. Anna-san, Tada, and Inui were in front of the skyway.

“*Hurry up...!* Mimorin! Shitty Kikkawa! Hurry, yeah!” Anna-san was waving at them vigorously. That made Kikkawa finally start to wonder what was going on behind him.

“What about Tokimune?!”

“You is alive, so climb *quickly*, yeah!”

“Don’t say it like that!”

Kikkawa was shocked by the way he’d snapped at her. It was pretty weird for him to get mad about something Anna-san said. No matter what came out of her mouth, you were supposed to accept it with gratitude. That was the unwritten rule of the Tokkis.

Become nothing, Kikkawa willed himself again. *Seriously, nothing.*

He didn’t want to empty his head, he wanted to erase his very existence. He was better off not existing if he was going to be like this. Kikkawa felt fresh tears spilling forth.

Yeah, I ought to become nothing, return to nothingness.

He felt hopelessly pathetic, but Kikkawa rushed out onto the skyway, still

sobbing. Then, once he got to the other side and was entering the next tower, he tripped.

“Bwugh?!” Kikkawa toppled over onto the stone floor. His shield protected his face, but he wasn’t going to be getting up.

“You’re in the way, asshole!” Tada kicked him aside, but Kikkawa just lay there, unmoving. Inui or someone else dragged Kikkawa behind them as they moved on.

“Okay, we’re good!”

Hearing Tokimune’s voice, a vague thought entered Kikkawa’s head. *Oh... Thank goodness.* That was it.

Tokimune hadn’t stayed behind by himself. Well, yeah, of course not. There was something wrong with Kikkawa if he’d thought even for a moment that Tokimune had pulled an “I’ll handle things here! The rest of you go on ahead!” Like, that wasn’t their thing, was it? The Tokkis didn’t do that stuff.

The Tokkis were different. No matter how bad things got, they’d all get out of it together. That was their style. Sure, self-sacrifice was cool and all, and maybe it was worthy of respect, but it was hard on the people you saved, so in the end, it was better to all survive together. That was why it was a core tenet of Tokkis-ism to always aim for no losses.

Basically, the point of Tokimune’s one-man show had always been to buy time for his comrades to retreat. He’d pushed the enemy back and then once everyone else had retreated he’d climbed the stairs himself. After that, he’d dashed across the skyway, and was now gloriously reunited with his comrades. It was up to Tada to do the rest.

Kikkawa got up, wiped the tears from his eyes with a snuffle, and bore witness to Tada’s demolition job.

“Tunahhhhhhhh!”

Tada did a flying somersault inside the tower, slamming his warhammer down on the skyway. Somersault Bomb. That was one of the warriors’ guild’s heavy-equipment fighting skills. Kikkawa had learned it too, but rarely ever used it. It was hard putting your weight behind the force of the spin properly. It was also

exhausting and easy to miss with. Tada's sense for aiming it must have come to him naturally. Sure, when his target was the floor, he could hit it with his eyes closed, but it was still a trick Kikkawa couldn't hope to emulate.

"Bonnn...!" The moment Tada's Somersault Bomb landed, he jumped again.
"Itohhh...!"

With a smash, he unleashed another Somersault Bomb.

"Sahrdine! Fatty tunah! Salmon rohh! Amberjahck!"

He pulled off six Somersault Bombs in a row. That was abnormal. This wasn't Somersault Bomb anymore. Shouldn't it have been considered a new skill, in an entirely different class? And he wasn't even finished. After unleashing the Six Bomb, he took a short breath and then swung again.

"Sahmohn...!"

Tada's warhammer tore into the left side of the skyway.

"Scahllophhh...!"

Next, he slammed it into the right side. Hard.

Idiot that he was, Kikkawa didn't realize this, but the skyway had already taken massive damage from the Six Bomb. In short, it was on the verge of breaking. One powerful blow to the left and right gave it a good push.

A push to where?

"Yeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeees...!" Anna-san's cry of delight was swallowed up by the rumble of the skyway's rapid collapse.

Tada flopped over. No, before he could hit his head on the ground, Tokimune caught him and laid him down gently. The Tokkis' hero was a sophisticated gentleman.

And so, the skyway went down with the black creatures that had been chasing them on it.

Tokimune had come up with this plan while he'd been away from the front line in order to rest. In other words, a hero never rested.

The Tokkis had been in tower nine of fourteen. Which tower had the skyway

Tada destroyed brought them to? Kikkawa didn't even know. What about Inui? Yeah, Inui. Inui would have checked. No doubt about it.

The Tokkis had abandoned the defense of the ninth tower and retreated to another tower of uncertain number. If this tower had already been overtaken by those strange black creatures, it'd be a disaster.

Inui hadn't just up and vanished on them. He'd probably had instructions from Tokimune. Inui had gone ahead to scout and reported back that this tower, whichever number it was, was safe. Then Tokimune had put the retreat plan into action.

Kikkawa hadn't been thinking.

Not one thought of value existed inside his skull.

"Oh, us? We're like a family, y'know? No, wait, we are a family! Like, Tokimune's the daddy, Anna-san's the mommy, Tadacchi's the big brother, Mimori-san's the big sister, I'm the youngest child, and Inui's our pet dog or something."

He'd said that to Haruhiro once.

For some reason, Kikkawa could clearly remember his exact tone of voice and expression from then. He could hear his own voice, so that was fine, but he couldn't see his own face, so there was no way he should have remembered it.

But Kikkawa could say this for certain: back then, he'd been wearing a goofy grin, his facial muscles all relaxed in an unflattering way, making him look kind of flaky.

"The youngest child, huh?"

He'd never used the excuse, *Well, hey, I'm the youngest child, so you can't really expect any more than this from me.* He'd never even thought that way before.

No, maybe he'd been acting like the youngest child of the family all this time without realizing it. If he hadn't been, the idea wouldn't have come up so readily in his conversation with Haruhiro.

At some point, Kikkawa found himself sitting down, hugging his knees.

“What’s wrong?” Tokimune asked, tapping him on the shoulder. If he hadn’t, Kikkawa might’ve stayed like that forever. Kikkawa looked up.

“Nothing...”

“You’ve got a look on your face like the world just ended,” Tokimune said with a flash of his white teeth. Even if he was exhausted—and it *was* starting to show—the hero’s face displayed endless good cheer.

His smile had always encouraged Kikkawa. No matter what they got themselves into, it made him think, *Welp, guess we’ve gotta do what we’ve gotta do*, every time.

He’s so amazing. Tokimune’s totally the man. I wanna be like him. The guy’s a hero to the core. How could I not look up to that? But at this particular moment, Tokimune’s smile looked so brilliant to him that it just hurt to see it. It hurt him in his heart. *Man, it’s rough. Real rough. It hurts so bad.*

Kikkawa was painfully aware now that he hadn’t fully comprehended just how big the difference between the two of them was. *Man, thinking I wanted to be like him? That’s just embarrassing. I mean, like, that’s just impossible for me, y’know?* The difference between Kikkawa and Tokimune was as great as the difference between a soaring eagle and a lowly turtle. Nah, more like a lowly turtle’s shit.

I could never be like him. Could never even get close. ‘Cause I’m turtle shit... But I knew that.

That’s right.

He’d figured it out a long time ago.

The Tokkis were a band of loud personalities with unusual abilities.

And who was Kikkawa in that group?

Mr. Ordinary.

Kikkawa was so bland compared to the rest of them.

At a stretch, you could say he was a total airhead, but was his superficial, laid-back personality really all that far from what was normal? However, despite his superficiality, he was also shameless, so he’d been able to hang around like he

was one of them just fine.

That said, he couldn't deny he struggled with feelings of inferiority. He'd honestly gotten depressed about it sometimes. Normally, a good sleep took care of that. Even if he couldn't stop caring about it, he'd just have to do whatever he possibly could. They were all good guys. He had zero worries about them ditching him.

No one was going to say, "Why can't you do anything, you loser? We're through with you. Get out," or anything like that. It was more, "Man, you just can't help yourself, huh? Well, whatever. That's just how you are. It's part of why you're one of us. The best thing to do is have fun with it."

That was how the Tokkis were.

I love you guys. I friggin' love all of you.

So why was he like this now? Why was Kikkawa wearing an expression that made Tokimune say he looked like the world had just ended?

"Oh..."

I get it.

That's how it is, huh?

Kikkawa finally figured out his feelings. What was eating away at him wasn't his weakness, inferiority, anger at his own ineptitude, despair, or shame. He had all those feelings, yes, but the root cause was something else.

It was just like Tokimune said.

The world *had* ended.

"Okay, come on..." Kikkawa said, hanging his head. "The world's seriously ended, hasn't it? With those bizarre black things. What the hell are they? I hear they took out Alterna too. Like, they say Shinoharacchi didn't make it or something, and Jin Mogis fled on his own, y'know? He basically brought them here to Riverside Iron Fortress with him. This place is screwed too now. We can't defend it. I mean, we've barely managed to hold out this long. We're all fine for the moment, but a whole bunch of the other volunteer soldiers have gotten taken out, right? It's bad. It's real bad..."

“Damn it, Kikkawa! What you mumbling ab...” Anna-san started angrily, but her voice trailed off into nothing.

“Urgh...” Mimori groaned.

The wheezing, heaving, panting breaths he heard were probably Tada’s.

“Heh...” Inui cleared his throat. “The time of the demon lord is at hand, I see. Heh...”

“I’m amazed by how you always come up with that crap!” Kikkawa tried to spring to his feet, but collapsed halfway. “Okay, real talk here... The world’s ending, right? Our situation just keeps getting worse. We get through this, and then what? There’s no hope. I’m fine with that, though. Dunno why... How should I say this? I don’t have that many regrets, y’know? I’ve had my fun. Every day was a blast. Like, I’ve got all these great memories. Because you guys were there with me. We were together. Man, I’ve been so blessed. Like, thank you so much, all of you. Because of you guys, I’ve got no regrets, but...still...I just... I don’t want it to end. Like, I don’t care about the world. But if the world’s ending, we’re all gonna die, right? I don’t want that.”

Kikkawa had lived his life as a volunteer soldier, even if he wasn’t a very good one. He’d had his brushes with death. He’d thought about dying a lot, such as what would happen when he died, or what it was like to be dead. Well, maybe it was like sleeping, but you didn’t dream. That was what Kikkawa figured. Normally, when you go to sleep, you wake back up later. But you don’t wake up from death. Still, if that was all it was, it wasn’t that scary.

He was fine with it. He didn’t care when he died.

But he didn’t want his comrades to die.

That wasn’t okay.

They were the Tokkis, so he was sure it’d be fine. As the youngest child, he’d be the first to go. He’d screw something up in a ridiculous way, and by the time he thought, *Aw, crap, I think I might die*, he’d be unconscious. Dead already.

He wanted to at least die in a way his comrades could laugh about. Something that would make them go, “Wow, that guy was an idiot. An idiot to the very end. I know I shouldn’t laugh and all, but, man, sorry, I’m gonna laugh.” Things

wouldn't get all gloomy that way.

Kikkawa believed in the Tokkis. Believed in them completely, to the very end.

So, yeah, it'll be fine for sure.

You guys would never ditch me.

I'm sure I'll probably get myself killed before the rest of you, but hey, cut me some slack, okay?

"What're we gonna do from here on? I want you guys to survive. That's all I want. But I'm getting the feeling there's not much hope of that. This is the end of the world..."

"Yeah." Tokimune suddenly crouched down and threw his arm around Kikkawa's shoulders. "I feel the same way. This world's heading toward its end. I dunno what that end's going to be, but it rules."

"Huh? It rules...?"

"It's the end of the world, man. That's a big deal. It doesn't happen often. Doesn't it make you shiver with excitement?"

"Uh, I've got the shivers...but it's not really from excitement."

"Hey, close enough. There's some overlap there. You can turn fear into excitement."

"That sounds like a bit of a stretch..."

"You scared, Kikkawa?" Tokimune asked, smiling broadly and pulling Kikkawa close to him. "Hmm? Are you?"

"Well, yeah... I am. I'm...scared, yeah. I'm just...a normal guy, unlike the rest of you..."

"I'm scared too."

"Huh?"

"Things have seriously gone pear-shaped here," Tokimune said plainly. "It was already bad enough with the orcs and undead coming to wage war on us, but now we've got this on our plates too. It seems like something's going on that's gonna change the face of Grimgar. I have no clue what that might be, though."

None whatsoever. That's bad too. The world's ending, huh? Yeah, sounds about right. The world as we know it is, at least. That's scary. You'd be nuts not to be scared."

"But..." Kikkawa had started shuddering, though he wasn't sure when.

Scared. Tokimune had just said he was scared. He'd put it plainly into words. Even Tokimune was scared?

"B-But..."

Kikkawa didn't want to accept it. He couldn't believe that.

"Y-You said you were excited."

"That's what I keep telling myself. But, well, I'm just trying to act tough."

"Trying to act tough? You, Tokimune?"

"I can't see where all this is going. But I want to spend every second I can with you guys. Nah, seconds aren't enough. I want more. I'm probably a selfish guy. That's why nobody feels more strongly than I do about how big a waste it is to not be enjoying every moment. It often occurs to me before I drift off to sleep that even if I don't know when it's going to happen, there will be a time when I have to let go of everything. I could lose *everything*. When I think about that, I feel numb. It's heavy and unbearable."

Tokimune was born to be a hero.

Kikkawa wanted to be like him, if he could.

But for an ordinary guy like Kikkawa, that seemed such a distant goal. No matter how he idolized Tokimune, he couldn't become him. The gap between them was too great.

Even Tokimune was scared?

Every once in a while, he thought about death?

He was scared of his own death, when he'd have to let go of everything, and the deaths of his precious comrades?

"I made a decision. When I start feeling that way, there's something I tell myself."

“What’s that?”

““Don’t be afraid, you coward.””

“Coward... Wait, you mean you, Tokimune?”

“Well, hey. We’re alive, but there are a lot more people who are dead. They all lived like we do, until they didn’t. Some of them must have been afraid of death like I am. Some must have been trembling and saying things like, ‘Whoa, that’s scary.’ Some probably passed on at peace with themselves, fully satisfied, and others went out like total badasses. Still, all of them, even the cowards like me, are good and dead. I know I’m going to be able to die a good death too. That’s what I decided to tell myself. Sure, I still get scared about it from time to time, as you’d expect. If I can, I’d rather avoid having you guys die, or having you lose me. I want to put that off as long as we can. I’m a greedy, stubborn guy like that.”

“Don’t...say that...” Kikkawa started to say, but he couldn’t continue.

He’d wanted Tokimune to stay his hero, always out of reach. But on the other hand, this was the first time Tokimune hadn’t seemed larger than life, and it felt reassuring.

Aw, man. I thought he was some sort of messed-up natural hero or something, but he’s just a normal human being, like me.

Was he a little disappointed? He couldn’t deny that. Now that he knew Tokimune had just been acting tough, he couldn’t rely on the paladin the same way he always had before now. Ultimately, what left Kikkawa unable to speak might have been the fact that he’d exposed his own nature as the spoiled youngest child of the Tokkis family.

“You done rambling yet?” Tada lumbered to his feet, took a breath, and cracked his neck to the left and right. Then he swung his warhammer around.

“Aw, yeah!” Anna-san shouted in a sharp voice, punching the air. “Break time over, yeah! Full speed ahead! Okay?! *Next!* Because it time for Plan A now, yeah!”

“Mm.” Mimori, who had been sitting down all this time, adjusted the position of her mage’s hat.

Inui was checking his ponytail. For a man, he was awfully particular about his hair.

Tokimune slapped Kikkawa on the shoulder. "Time to head out, Kikkawa. Let's go see the end of the world together."

"Sounds like a plan..." Deep in his heart, Kikkawa whispered, *Don't be afraid, you coward.*

By the time he stood up with Tokimune, he'd be back to his usual self. He would have to be.

He had a place with the Tokkis, even if he didn't deserve it, so it wasn't like Kikkawa to sit around pitying himself. With his idiocy came a laid-back personality. He was so airheaded you'd think he might float away. That was Kikkawa, youngest child of the Tokkis family.

Was that the role he had to keep playing to stay with them? It sure was. Being a goof wasn't something Kikkawa could do without acting. But even Tokimune wasn't always completely himself. Everyone had a person they wanted to be, and one they didn't want to be. They faked this or that, tricking the people around them, or perhaps themselves, into seeing them as bigger, or sometimes smaller, than they actually were.

Everyone was lovable. And Kikkawa loved his comrades in the Tokkis more than anyone else.

"Let's head for the fifth tower."

Tokimune led the way as they headed down the stairs.

The tower they had been in before was the ninth, and the one they had crossed over to via the bridge was apparently the thirteenth. The ninth and thirteenth towers had served a somewhat special role among the fourteen towers of Riverside Iron Fortress. They were each connected to several other towers by bridges, but they had no entrances on the ground level. They also had storage for supplies on the top floor and underground.

Additionally, the seventh and fourteenth towers had secret underground passages that led outside the fortress. But the fourteenth tower had been largely destroyed in the many battles the fortress had seen, and its secret

passage was no longer usable.

The seventh tower was their trump card for getting out of there. The stairs to the underground were behind a thin stone wall. If it came down to it, they could mass their remaining forces, head there, and escape.

Incidentally, destroying the bridges was something they were generally forbidden from doing. The complex system of bridges connecting the towers let them move back and forth from one to another easily. The defenders made use of this system to retreat when they were at a disadvantage, support their allies, and buy time. Meanwhile, for the attacking side, if they dropped the bridges, they wouldn't be able to pursue their enemies and would risk isolating themselves.

The Tokkis' hand had been forced, though. If they hadn't made that move, someone definitely would have died. Possibly all of them.

Finally, they arrived at something like a landing, with a bridge to the fifth tower. It looked like there was a fight going on over there.

"Inui?!" Tokimune asked, and Inui widened his right eye—the one not covered by his eye patch—and looked across the bridge.

"Heh!"

"Aw, man, is he about to unleash his demon eye?! He is, isn't he?!" Kikkawa shouted. He was able to do it with his usual tenor. That reassured him a bit, but also earned him an elbow from Tada.

"Ow?!"

"Inui doesn't have anything like that."

"Tadacchi, not in the back of the head, please! You're gonna make me even stupider than I already am!"

"There's no cure for being a fool. No way to fix Kikkawa's stupid, yeah!" Anna-san winked and gave him a thumbs up.

Mimori nodded. "So it's okay to hit him."

"Oh, I seeee. There's no fixing my idiocy, so it's okay to hit me..." Kikkawa played along with the joke. Then, as always, "No, it's not!" he provided the

comedic retort.

“Over in the fifth tower...”

Inui was crouched low, moving his arms in all directions. He did this kind of thing all the time. It was creepy and off-putting, but you got used to it.

“I see Iron Knuckle and the Berserkers...! Or that should be who it is...! Heh!”

“You’re not sounding so confident there, y’know?!” Kikkawa said.

“Okay, let’s support them!” Tokimune declared, taking off at a dash.

Tada, Kikkawa, Mimori, Anna-san, and Inui followed. They were starting to get a vague picture of what it was like on the other side of the bridge in the fifth tower. There was a person with one foot out on the bridge. He had red hair and was wrapped in a blackish cape.

“It’s him!” Kikkawa shouted in an awfully loud voice, causing the redheaded man to turn and look at them. There were not many active-duty volunteer soldiers who had the kind of presence this man did. He was older than them, probably in his forties.

“Reinforcements have arrived!” the redhead called into the fifth tower with a throaty voice. He had his sword drawn, but it wasn’t clear if he was fighting. Kikkawa had a bad opinion of people who acted all self-important the way this guy did.

“Jin Mogis! You’re the one who brought those black weirdos here!”

The Tokkis were almost across the bridge. Jin Mogis, meanwhile, was trying to leave the fifth tower. They were going to pass each other.

Tokimune leapt into the fifth tower. Even if slashing Mogis might have been going a little too far, Kikkawa wished he’d at least tripped the bastard as he went past. He was sure he’d seen a slight smirk on the man’s face.

“Man, he pisses me off!”

But, well, there was no time for that, so he raced into the fifth tower after Tokimune. Downstairs, a group of volunteer soldiers had formed into a scrum. It looked like the men of Iron Knuckle and the Berserkers had made a wall of shields, armor, and their own flesh in order to block the black creatures from

coming up the stairs and to try pushing them back. The Tokkis only had six members, but Iron Knuckle and the Berserkers were bigger, so they could use tactics like that, huh?

They weren't close to either of the other clans, but they at least knew the boss of Iron Knuckle, "One-on-One" Max, and his right-hand man, Aidan, as well as "Red Devil" Ducky of the Berserkers and his second-in-command, Saga. Max looked like a young gang leader, and Ducky was a big guy with red hair—not natural, but dyed that color. Both were in the scrum. Farther up the stairs from their position was Saga of the Berserkers, wearing a mage's hat low over his eyes.

"Anna-san, Mimori, stay back!" Tokimune took up a position at the rear of the scrum and started pushing the men in front of him. "Kikkawa, Tada, Inui, we're gonna push!"

"Yessir!"

"Boring!"

"Heh!"

Tada seemed pretty unamused by the idea, but the four men of the Tokkis still joined the scrum, pushing and pushing and pushing some more. Kikkawa had thought he was at the very back, but somehow he ended up in the middle of the press. It looked like they were keeping the scrum intact by having the men in front pull back and the men in back move up in turns. How were they doing that, exactly? It was a mystery to Kikkawa. Or rather, he was too crushed to think about it. The stench of sweat was choking him.

At some point, Kikkawa got pushed to the very front.

The black creatures were there, on the other side of the shields.

I'm dead. Dead. So dead. Kikkawa moaned, groaned, and wailed. *I'm gonna die. So gonna die here. Oh crap. Oh crappity crap. This is beyond insane. They're pushing me too hard from behind. Our allies are gonna kill me before the enemy can. If you push that hard, you're gonna break my back, guys! No, worse than that. You're gonna smash every bone in my body and grind me up. I'll be mincemeat when this is over!*

I can't take any more, nuh-uh, no way, no how, no siree Bob, no—

As he was on the verge of passing out, Kikkawa was pulled back from the front line to the second row, then the third and fourth, falling back one row at a time. As the pressure on his body lessened and he found himself able to breathe properly again, his consciousness returned. Next thing he knew, it was happening again. Yes, again. He was sucked forward, forward, against his will.

No. I don't like this. I hate it. I don't wanna go to the front. I like it better in back.

But they wouldn't let him stay there. No one cared how Kikkawa felt. Once he got to the front, he'd just have to bear it.

After several trips through the scrum—he wasn't even sure how many—Kikkawa was at the very back again.

"This is going nowhere!"

"We can't hold them back forever!"

Two people were yelling at each other. Who? He didn't know, but probably Max and Ducky. Had they left the scrum?

"It sounds like Britney and Kajiko retreated from the seventh!"

"What're we gonna do?! If the seventh tower falls, we can't escape!"

"Concentrate our forces! Our only choice is to break through!"

That last throaty voice belonged to Jin Mogis.

"We need to make contact with our allies and gather in one tower! Once we do that, we head out through the already broken gate!"

"Screw you! Who said you could talk?!"

"You lost your army, and now you're acting like you're in charge here?!"

Max and Ducky both tore into Jin Mogis. Kikkawa had some choice words for the man himself, but he was pulled back into the scrum against his will.

This again?! Seriously?! I'm gonna get pushed even farther forward? Could you give me a break?

Kikkawa wanted to complain, but he remembered someone saying something about how the game was over the moment you gave up. Wait, this wasn't a game. It was more serious and important than that. Which was all the more reason he couldn't give up. He couldn't die in the middle of this nonsense.

Don't be afraid, you coward.

We're gonna see the end of the world together. It's not over yet. I can't die until it ends. It'd be such a shame to die here.

112A660. He Was Happy

Adachi adjusted the bridge of his black-rimmed glasses with the middle finger of his right hand.

Gathered in the second tower of Riverside Iron Fortress were the four members of Team Renji, including Adachi; Britney, the former chief of the now-defunct Volunteer Soldier Corps office; seven Wild Angels, led by Kajiko; the six members of the Tokkis; eight people from Iron Knuckle, including Max and Aidan; eleven Berserkers, including Ducky and Saga; three volunteer soldiers who didn't belong to any clan; and Commander Jin Mogis of the Frontier Army. That was forty-one people in total.

They had just finished demolishing the bridge that connected this second tower to the fifth tower, and another that connected it to the sixth tower. They wouldn't be able to move to any other towers via the bridges now. After looking all around, they had found that this was the only tower where the enemy wasn't coming in from the ground floor. That was why they had chosen to gather here.

They'd had the option to retake the seventh tower and escape through the secret underground passage in the basement, but the ninth and eleventh towers, which were the only two connected to it by bridges, had already been occupied. While the secret passage was likely intact, no one had confirmed that. It wouldn't have been funny if they'd fought their way down there only to find out the escape tunnel was now unusable. They were going to head out into the courtyard from the ground level of the second tower, then make their way to the gate. It was the only option.

"But is it gonna work?" Ron, a man with a buzz-cut, mumbled to himself.

"If it doesn't, we'll just die. That's all," Adachi replied, provoking an exaggerated scowl.

"Don't say things like that, man. You're hurting our morale."

“If you hadn’t asked such an inane question in the first place, it follows that I’d never have commented on it. In other words, you are in the wrong here. It’s your fault.”

“If you ask me, it’s your fault for being too much of a wise guy. *Everything* is *your* fault.”

“There’s not much logic in you, is there? This isn’t even worth discussing.”

“Let me tell you, logic isn’t everything, okay?”

“That *would* be the argument of a loser who can’t think things through rationally, yes.”

“Oh, I so want to slug you one.”

“If you want to do it, then go ahead. I’ll have Chibi-san heal any wound you give me. Your actions would put an undue burden on our little priest, but accomplish nothing more.”

“You know I can’t cause trouble for Chibi! If you say that, I can’t clobber you, damn it!”

“If that’s your decision, I’ll have to respect it. Do as you please.”

Adachi adjusted the position of his glasses with the middle finger of his right hand again. Now, Ron wasn’t the only one here who could be loud and annoying. While Adachi’s other comrades, Renji and Chibi, were especially quiet, most of the volunteer soldiers packed into this cramped stairway were pushing and shoving, bantering, or telling stupid jokes and ribald stories.

“Chibi.” Renji placed his big hand on her tiny head. “You okay?”

“Aye...” Chibi responded hesitantly with a nod, but Renji didn’t move his hand.

Renji wasn’t particularly sociable, and he’d been pretty cold toward the now-deceased Sassa. But when it came to Chibi, you could tell he trusted her implicitly. He was always kind to Chibi.

Still, after they had left the Red Continent to return to Grimgar, Renji had grown even softer on her. At times, he treated her almost like a pet. For one thing, he often patted her on the head. Understandable, given how pettable she

was, but he was overdoing it. Honestly, it was hard to watch.

If it were anyone but Chibi, Adachi would have told him not to favor her so much, but he knew Chibi wouldn't let it go to her head. She was one stoic little woman. Always harsh toward herself and demanding little of others. From the very beginning, she'd had blind faith in Renji. Obviously, her feelings for him probably went beyond that. Adachi had ended up thinking that her feelings deserved a response, and he wished for her happiness more than anyone else's.

Even so, when he saw Renji showing concern for her like that, irritation began to cloud Adachi's heart.

Was it jealousy?

Well, there was no doubt that Adachi envied Chibi.

He'd realized that years ago.

At first, Adachi hadn't been able to accept it himself. *No. It's not true. It can't be.* He'd kept denying it until he couldn't anymore. Because someone had pointed it out to him.

It had been on the Red Continent.

Why did that vast land across the blue sea have that name? It wasn't that the soil was red, that the rivers ran red, or that the leaves or trunks of the trees were red. There was a greater variety of races there than in Grimgar. The tailed people, the long-armed people, the tall-eared people, the three-eyed people, the many-eyed people, the iron-headed people, the furry people, the thorny-skinned people, the feather-boned people, the shadowless people, the ball-shaped people, and more. There were all these different groups, like nothing he had ever seen or heard of, and yet they were all considered human. There were many countries. Large and small, too many of them to count. As it turned out, some centuries ago, a great emperor known as the Red King had reigned over the entire continent. And that's where the name came from.

Everything they saw and touched there had been new to them. Thinking back on it now, Team Renji had been acting uncharacteristically giddy.

One night, they had been camping out in the wasteland. Adachi had found himself unable to sleep, as was often the case, so he'd left his tent to gaze at

the night sky. As he did, Sassa had called out to him. With a smile, she'd told him she hadn't been able to sleep either.

"They call it the Red Continent, but the moon's not red here, huh? Even though the moon we see in Grimgar always is," she'd said.

"How many times are you going to bring that up?" he'd replied dismissively.

"Hey, Adachi."

"What? Why don't you go to sleep already?"

"You..."

"If you've got something to say, could you hurry up already?"

"You like Renji, don't you?"

"Well...we are comrades, after all."

"No, not like that. You *like* like him. I can tell. Because I feel the same way."

But I like him more, she'd added with a smile.

Why hadn't he been able to accept it then?

"You couldn't be more wrong..." Adachi had tried to dismiss it as if it were a joke. No, he'd gone further than that. "Never say that again. Or I'll make you pay for it."

He'd gotten angry. Adachi had been embarrassed. He'd threatened her, as if she'd insulted him somehow. But that wasn't it.

"Sorry, Adachi," Sassa had apologized.

He'd made her say she was sorry.

"I won't bring it up again."

There was no connection between that conversation and how she had lost her life on the Red Continent.

She had been a thief. As part of her job, there were times she had to act alone. That was something she had been fine with. *I'd feel lonely if I were always by myself, but sometimes it's nice to have some alone time,* she'd said.

There was a type of dragon on the Red Continent called a nihaloy. They

weren't that large, but they were clever and could change color to blend in with their surroundings. They tended to form packs and amass treasure. She had gone out to scout one of their nests and hadn't returned. It wasn't that she couldn't, but that she didn't, Adachi suspected. She had likely been detected and injured in an attack by the nihalloys. But if she had returned to the party, she would have brought the nihalloys down on them. Knowing her, she had decided she couldn't do that to them.

When they'd gotten sick of waiting for her and charged into the nest, it had taken them not one, but two full days to find her. She had already died. In an unrecognizable state.

"It's better this way," Ron had said, wiping the tears from his eyes. "Now we'll only remember her as she was when she was still alive."

It wasn't my fault.

That's what Adachi thought.

The fact was, the odds that her exchange with Adachi had led to her demise were zero, or incredibly close to it. But he wished he'd acknowledged that she was right. What would he have had to lose, being honest with her then? Would she have tattled on him? No. He could say that with certainty. She wasn't the type to do that.

Never say that again.

Or I'll make you pay for it.



Adachi shouldn't have said those things to her. He shouldn't have made her apologize to him. But even if Adachi hadn't lied to her, would it have changed anything? Either way, she'd have died in the nihalo nest. Just the same. They'd have lost her no matter what he did, so he didn't need to regret it that badly. And yet, regret it he did. Deeply. Why? He had a theory. He regretted it because of what it meant for him.

He should have opened up to her. She'd seen right through him. There'd been no point in him denying it. So, why not come out and say it?

Yeah, I do.

That's right. Can you blame me? I've tried to tell myself I was imagining it. Denied it, saying, "No, I can't feel that way" countless times. But it's no use. The feelings won't go away. They're the one thing I can't get rid of. Yeah, you're right. I do like him. I like him more than I know how to handle. Am I weird? Go ahead, laugh at me. I don't mind. I want to laugh at myself too. The reason I want to be with him, with Renji, isn't because he's an important comrade of mine. No, it must be because I love him.

She wouldn't have laughed. He was sure she'd have said, *You're not weird. There's nothing weird about it.*

Maybe they would have found they had a lot in common. Renji was fastidious to a fault. If he was going to fall in love with someone, it wouldn't be one of his traveling companions. He was the type who liked to compartmentalize things, say this was this, and that was that. Adachi had never expected Renji to love him back, obviously, and neither had Sassa.

If Adachi hadn't been lying to himself, maybe he could have opened up to her. They might have been able to have a genuine heart-to-heart about it. They might have become something more than comrades—true friends.

No, that's not it. That's not the problem.

Adachi had wanted to share the emotions that he'd been hiding all this time with someone. She would have heard him out, but he'd lacked the courage. How pathetic. Adachi had thrown away the perfect opportunity. That was all he was regretting. These feelings weren't for her sake. Adachi didn't even have the

right to pretend to mourn her passing.

“Well, let’s be off, then. Are you all ready to go, my darlings?” Britney’s voice echoed through the stairs of the second tower. Adachi couldn’t see him. Going from the bottom up, the groups were ordered: Iron Knuckle, Britney, Jin Mogis, the Berserkers, the Wild Angels, Team Renji, the Tokkis, and then the three unaffiliated soldiers. Adachi could only see down as far as the back half of the Berserkers.

“Any time you’re ready!”

"We ready, yeah!"

“Aww right!”

"I'm bored! Let's do this already!"

“Heh!”

“Yayyyy.”

Hearing the Tokkis energetic responses from behind them, Ron shouted, “Yeahhhh!” like the idiot he was, and the other clans started hyping themselves up in their own ways too.

“We! Are! Iron! Knuckle!”

“Yeahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

“Smash ‘em good, Berserkers!”

"Rahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

“Don’t any more of you die, my angels! Got it?!”

"Yes, ma'am!"

“We love you, Kajiko!”

“The Wild Angels sure are fired up!” Ron was excited too, for some reason. That reason being that he tended to overextend himself when members of the opposite sex were nearby. He wasn’t popular with the ladies, but he liked them too much to control himself. He’d even gone after thorny-skinned and furry women on the Red Continent, only to be rejected there too. It wasn’t so much that they disliked him as that they looked down on him. He was a macho guy

with a buzz-cut and a pretty scary face, but something must have given away the fact that, deep down inside, he was just way too desperate for it. More so than should have been humanly possible. Or, worse yet, it was blatantly obvious.

Renji was silent, though one could have read that as him quietly simmering with enthusiasm. He was relaxed. As if he weren't thinking anything at all. Almost vegetative, in a way.

"Renji." Adachi called his name.

"Yeah," Renji replied in a deep voice, turning his eyes to the mage. "I'll leave analyzing the situation to you. You give the orders."

"Got it." Adachi kept his response as curt as possible. It irked him that being trusted with a task like this made his heart race.

He'd just do what he needed to, like always.

Sassa.

She had been the same way.

Or maybe she'd been holding out hope for something. Like, if she served Renji, working herself to the bone for the team, maybe he'd give her a chance one day. Though she had thought it was impossible, some part of her heart had wished it could happen. Prayed for it to. Well, even if that had been the case, he couldn't mock her for it.

"I won't let any of us die." Even if it was just occasionally, Adachi sometimes had foolish dreams of his own. "Because if we lose even one of us, my own survival will be at risk."

"Yeah, you're pretty scrawny, after all!" Ron said, slapping Adachi on the back, nearly causing him to start coughing and sputtering.

"*You*, I'll use as a sacrificial pawn if it comes down to it."

"Go for it. If you think that's what needs to be done, say the word. I'm more than ready."

"Auhhh!" Chibi was getting mad at Ron—quite an unusual sight.

“R-Right...” he said, abashed, and lowered his head meekly. “Sorry. I mean, it’s just that we can’t rule it out...”

“Wuuuh,” Chibi whined.

“S-Sorry, okay? I shouldn’t have said that. I’ll do my best so everyone can get out of here with room to spare.”

“Uuh...” Chibi shook her head. Ron scratched his buzz-cut.

“Huh? What?”

“She’s saying that no matter how hard *you* try, that’s clearly just not going to be possible,” Adachi explained on her behalf, causing Ron to turn red with anger.

“Whaaaa?!”

“Don’t snap at me. Chibi-san is the one who doesn’t think you’re up to the task.”

“Chibi’s free to think what she wants, but I don’t wanna hear it from you! Have a care for how others feel, four-eyes!”

“*Four-eyes?*”

One of the Tokkis hit the wall with his warhammer. It was Tada, the priest who didn’t act much like one.

“You say something to me, you pig-shit bastard?”

“I’m not talking to you! And ‘pig-shit bastard’?! You wanna fight?!”

“Gladly. I’m the one who’d win anyway.”

“No, I would! Obviously, I’d win!”

“Good to see you’re all so full of energy! Time for the operation to start!” Britney shouted. Ron and Tada instantly buried the hatchet. The column of troops started to move.

They’d already surveyed the situation below from the bridge. The fortress courtyard was practically full of strange black humanoids and crawling black things that hadn’t managed to take human form. The volunteer soldiers were going to push their way through those hostile black creatures to the broken

main gate. Once they were out of Riverside Iron Fortress, the Lonesome Field Outpost was about ten kilometers to the northeast. In terms of places in the vicinity that they could flee to, the Wonder Hole—which was not far from there—was about all they had left.

It could hardly be called safe, but the Wonder Hole was so vast—or long and deep, rather—that no one even came close to knowing the full extent of it. It was said to reach all the way to the far north. The Wonder Hole connected to the surface in other places too, so they could use it to run far away. Or at least, it wouldn't be impossible for them to do so.

On top of that, the Wonder Hole connected to multiple other worlds. It was dangerous because the residents of those worlds sometimes wandered into this one too, but if the situation called for it, evacuating to another world might not be unthinkable.

There were also volunteer soldiers who hadn't come back from exploring the Wonder Hole. If their group could join up with them, that would be especially reassuring.

Honestly, the volunteer soldiers were in a position where their only options were either fanciful optimism or utter despair. Some of them must have been depressed, or giving in to desperation. Even so, they had all managed to work together and were about to engage in what might be their final battle.

Despite being one himself, Adachi had never really liked volunteer soldiers much as a whole. Still, setting his personal preferences aside, every survivor here with them now was a comrade. If they didn't amass all their strength, none of them were going to make it to the Wonder Hole. He was going to have to think of the volunteer soldiers, and former volunteer soldiers like Britney, as part of his team for now.

"We're heading out!" shouted "One-on-One" Max of Iron Knuckle.

As Adachi followed Renji down the stairs, there was a certain man on his mind: Jin Mogis. The redheaded general who had brought reinforcements from the mainland of the Kingdom of Arabakia south of the Tenryu Mountains.

Incredibly, he'd managed to retake Alterna after it had fallen to the Southern Expedition. But what had really shocked the volunteer soldiers was the sudden

turnaround of him then signing a non-aggression pact with the goblins of Damuro after he'd just chased them off.

Adachi had been a little surprised too, but he'd also thought, *I never realized that was an option.*

Most of the volunteer soldiers had experience massacring goblins in the Old City of Damuro, so they tended to have a prejudiced view of them. They started out with the assumption that goblins were lesser, brutish creatures, so they couldn't possibly talk to them.

But from what he'd since heard, this wasn't the first time there had been a deal between humans and goblins.

It had been nearly 140 years ago, in the year 521 of the kingdom's calendar. The Alliance of Kings led by the No-Life King had taken the Kingdom of Arabakia's southernmost city, Damuro.

It had been the last refuge of humanity, and with that final lifeline cut, they'd had nowhere left where they could hold out. They had been forced to retreat completely beyond the Tenryu Mountains, and so Damuro had become the property of the goblins. Out of bitterness, the people of Arabakia had come to call the lands north of the Tenryus the frontier, and the lands south of that the mainland.

However, thirty-some years later, in the year 555, the Kingdom of Arabakia had returned to the frontier.

At the time, the frontier had been reduced to chaos due to events like the death of the No-Life King, but even if you took that into consideration, the bridgehead the kingdom had built was still too close to Damuro. They were only four kilometers apart. It was practically a stone's throw away. That was the fort that had developed into Alterna.

The goblins must have been bought off by the Kingdom of Arabakia. If not, they wouldn't have overlooked the construction of Alterna.

The way Adachi saw it, for a mainlander like Jin Mogis, making peace with the goblins wasn't such an off-the-wall idea. However, it was easier said than done. The man had the ability to make decisions and put them into effect. He was also

a capable commander, and ambitious too.

Jin Mogis had appeared as the leader of the Kingdom of Arabakia's expeditionary force. But he wasn't a general of the kingdom anymore. He'd taken his forces and separated from the Kingdom of Arabakia. Adachi had heard that after reorganizing his men into a new independent force, he had renamed them the Frontier Army and taken on the title of commander for himself. He might have only refrained from calling himself king because in reality he was more like the mayor of Alterna and the head of its defense force. Even so, he was the master of a nation, small as it was. Or, he *had* been.

He'd cast his castle and his men away, fleeing all by himself. He had apparently been on horseback at first, but was on foot by the time he'd reached Riverside Iron Fortress. You would expect a man fleeing in disgrace to look more crestfallen, but not him. He had ordered the volunteer soldiers around as if he felt no guilt at all for what had happened, and despite their contempt for him, he wasn't ignored and hadn't been driven out. They'd sort of accepted him.

Jin Mogis was by no means a comrade. The man would throw anyone and anything away to save his own skin. He wasn't so much a Machiavellian operator as a straight-up psychopath.

What was his plan here?

Sacrificial pawns.

They say a captain goes down with his ship, but this man had been the first to flee his own city, Alterna. He'd left his men to die. Worse yet, he might have even used them as bait for the enemy. Sacrificing them to save himself.

Were the volunteer soldiers to be his new pawns, then? How was he going to pull that off, exactly?

Adachi didn't know, but he was wary. That man was definitely going to try to pull something. It was best to assume as much.

Renji and Ron were almost all the way down the stairs, about to head out of the second tower.

"Let's go!" Ron shouted as he charged outside. Renji didn't even appear to be running. He strode out the door, carrying the sword of Ish Dogran as if it were

light.

Adachi and Chibi stepped into the courtyard as well. He hardly felt the chill of the after-midnight air. The volunteer soldiers were already violently struggling with the enemy. Dark. Inside the tower, there had been lots of lanterns, but the courtyard had only had watch fires lit here and there, and those must have been knocked over by the black invaders, because there wasn't a single one left to be seen. Light from the watch fires atop the towers and the fortress barely reached the courtyard.

"Light 'em up!" someone shouted.

Was it Max of Iron Knuckle? Instantly, four or five luminous rods were being chucked around. These were rods that if you pushed one of their ends in and removed the sheath that covered them, they would burn for around two minutes, providing light. They were made by the gnomes who lived under the Tenryu Mountains, and had been carried by merchants in Alterna who specialized in such goods. They had been expensive before, despite being one-use, but now you couldn't buy them for any price. They were that valuable.

The luminous rods improved visibility a little. Iron Knuckle and the Berserkers formed up into one mass, and it looked like they were managing to push toward the main gate. Max and Ducky were leading the way, with Britney right there next to them, swinging his sword as if he were dancing, his hair streaming behind him. Kajiko and the Wild Angels were following them too.

"We're taking the left!" Tokimune declared as he ran past Adachi. He probably meant that the Tokkis were going to support the left flank of the leading group, so he wanted Team Renji to handle the right.

"Renji, go right!" Adachi called out, but Renji and Ron were already heading in that direction. Chibi was sticking close to Adachi, but he soon took off after Renji and Ron, who were finding themselves stymied by the enemy and unable to make progress the way they wanted to.

"Ugh, damn it! These guys are such a goddamn pain!"

Ron was using a greatsword that looked like a butcher's knife blown up to five or six times the usual size. It could cut through most things, but not the hostile black creatures. He couldn't slash through them, try as he might, so Ron had

given up and taken to mowing them down or sending them flying instead.

No matter how many they knocked aside, the hostile black creatures kept rushing toward them one after another. No amount of swinging his sword put a dent in their numbers. That had to be tiring, and frustrating. The stress was intense. Still, he had no choice but to continue. He had to keep at it or he wouldn't be able to take a single step forward.

But it looked like Renji was having a harder time of things.

Renji favored using the single-edged greatsword that had once belonged to an orc named Ish Dogran. It was a masterwork, several times sharper than Ron's weapon. Yet all that wondrous sharpness meant nothing here. Against the hostile black creatures, even a sword as extraordinary as that one was not significantly different from an iron club.

Also, unlike Ron, who tried to overpower his opponents with pure strength, Renji was much more skillful. If you were to convert their physical strength into numerical values, Ron's would be higher than Renji's. Ron might not have been the taller of the two, but he had an abnormal amount of muscle on him. And yet, if they got into a contest of strength, Renji would come out the victor. Ron used one hundred percent of what he had. Renji, meanwhile, used more like ninety, but used finesse to turn it into one hundred and ten. However, now even Renji was being forced to handle the hostile black creatures the same way as Ron.

No, was there more to it?

From what Adachi could see, the hostile black creatures seemed to be rushing Renji harder than Ron. Renji simply had more enemies—a higher volume of them—to deal with than Ron did.

It was starting to seem less like Ron was batting away creatures that were coming at him and more like he was fending off part of the swarm that was after Renji. Ron was helping Renji.

“Are they targeting Renji?!”

Adachi adjusted his glasses with the middle finger of his right hand. Team Renji had gotten bogged down maybe five or six meters outside the second

tower. Iron Knuckle, the Berserkers, the Wild Angels, and the Tokkis were leaving them behind. They were swamped with enemies. Hostile black creatures rushed them from all sides. Yet, despite that, Adachi didn't sense much danger to himself. Was it because Chibi was protecting him? Yes, Chibi was certainly swinging her combat staff at the creatures and knocking them back. But was she driving off enemies that were coming at them? No, she was taking shots at creatures that were trying to get past her, wasn't she?

So, in effect, she wasn't really protecting Adachi. She too was driving off a few more of the black creatures that were aiming for Renji.

In short, Chibi was helping Renji too.

"Why...?"

Adachi thought about it. It was all he could do at the moment. These hostile black creatures weren't just immune to being cut, they also seemed impervious to magic. Even if the side effects—for example, a blast wave from a magical explosion—could send them flying, he risked injuring his own allies in the process. As a mage, he was practically dead weight. So he needed to at least think. His head. He had to use his head.

Why were the black creatures targeting Renji?

What were they after?

It didn't seem like there were any clues to work with.

Now isn't the time to give up. Keep thinking, he told himself. Answers aren't easy to come by. You have to keep thinking until you find them. Look at it from a variety of angles. They're targeting Renji. Is it only Renji they're focusing on? The enemy. Those hostile black creatures. What even are they to begin with?

Those things hadn't attacked Riverside Iron Fortress until after Jin Mogis had fled here. From what he had told the volunteer soldiers, the mysterious enemies had appeared outside Alterna this morning, before dawn. The Frontier Army had defended the city while Shinohara had led Orion out through the south gate, then vanished. Eventually, Alterna was encircled, and the enemy had gradually started getting inside the walls. With no other choice, the Frontier Army had attempted to evacuate the city but had lost many men in the process.

Ultimately, only Jin Mogis had made it to Riverside Iron Fortress. Then, right after he did, the enemy had swarmed the fortress too.

From the sound of things, the enemy was chasing Jin Mogis. The Wild Angels, who were on gate duty at the time, had let him in and then immediately closed the gates, holding the enemy off. That was what Adachi had been told, and it was the reason many volunteer soldiers believed Jin Mogis had brought the enemy to them.

In other words, the enemy had been targeting Jin Mogis too.

Where was he now?

There. In the middle of the leading group. He wasn't at the front. That man had put himself right in the middle.

Enemies were swarming them as well.

But it wasn't that the enemy was targeting the leading group. It was that the enemy's target, Jin Mogis, was in the center of the leading group. That was why they were getting swarmed.

So, he was forcing the leading group to defend him, then, wasn't he?

Why was the enemy after Jin Mogis and Renji?

"Renji! What now?!" Ron shouted as he launched a black creature into the air.

Aragarfald. Renji's trump card. He could use his relic's power to break out of this situation. But Renji didn't answer Ron. He just kept swinging the sword of Ish Dogran in silence. He didn't rule out using the armor, but he must have been torn on what to do.

"Renji and his team are falling behind!" That was Britney's voice. It sounded distant. There were more than ten meters between the vanguard and Team Renji now. Possibly closer to twenty.

The leading group was trying to fight its way into a space between two towers. They were almost at the main gate.

Jin Mogis. Adachi couldn't help but focus on that man. It might not have been the time, but he found himself unable to look anywhere else.

Was he being irrational? If so, Adachi ought to reconsider what he was doing. Stop obsessing over that man. Just focus on Team Renji. He needed to forget Jin Mogis for the moment.

“Nostarem sanguis sacrifici.”

That was when Jin Mogis made his move. What language was that? The words were unfamiliar, but they sounded kind of like Latin to Adachi.

What was *Latin*?

He didn't know. Was it some kind of spell? Or maybe a keyword? Whatever it was, it triggered something.

Iron Knuckle, the Berserkers, the Wild Angels, the Tokkis, Britney, and all the rest collapsed at the same time.

No, that was just how it seemed. It wasn't that the entire leading group hit the ground simultaneously. Some fell down, others dropped on their backsides, while many managed to stay on their feet, but unsteadily. Had they been struck by something? Was it magic of some sort? You'd have expected a scream or two if that were the case, but not one of them had cried out like that. All Adachi heard were small grunts and groans like “Agh...” and “Urkh...” Had they suddenly been overcome by dizziness? Or had their legs given out? Had their strength been sapped somehow? What had happened? Whatever it was, *something* had been done to them.

That man was the sole exception.

Just one man, the redhead in the black cape, Jin Mogis, was standing upright.

The volunteer soldiers in the leading group—now sitting, lying on the ground, or hunching over, barely able to stay on their feet—seemed to be wrapped in a faint mist, or perhaps a heat haze.

What was that?

And why was Jin Mogis completely fine?

Well, that part was obvious.

It was because he was the one responsible. What had he done? That wasn't clear, but when he'd chanted “nostarem sanguis sacrifici,” it had done

something.

Jin Mogis sucked up the mist or haze in no time at all. It just vanished in an instant. Had it all gone inside him? Had the man absorbed it? If so, that meant...

What?

What did it all mean? What in the world was happening?

Adachi didn't understand. It was a struggle just to put his thoughts in order. Jin Mogis had done *something*, and it had rendered the leading group unable to fight. Having been separated from the pack, Team Renji—including Adachi—were still fine. But the hostile black creatures hadn't stopped moving. Their attack was unrelenting.

"One-on-One" Max and Aidan of Iron Knuckle had been at the very front with "Red Devil" Ducky of the Berserkers. Max and Ducky were the leaders of their respective clans, and they had taken it upon themselves to lead the charge, knocking the onrushing black enemies aside one after another. They'd fought harder in the vanguard than anyone, showing off their manly power, winning the respect of their comrades by protecting them, and thus holding their martially-minded clans together. It was unthinkable that such men would be so easily felled. Naturally, victory and defeat were part and parcel of a warrior's life. Even Max and Ducky, excellent as they were, could have found themselves defeated if their luck went sour. But even if that were to happen, they would have gone down in a heroic display of valor after an intense fight.

Yet Max and Ducky had simply hung their heads, falling to one knee. Then the hostile black creatures had rushed over them in an instant. They'd simply been engulfed. Unable to resist. Unable to run away. Gone in a second.

It had been the same for Aidan and the other members of Iron Knuckle and the Berserkers on the forefront of the leading group. A number of the Wild Angels in the rear had been taken out too.

The Tokkis were slightly separated from the others, off on their left flank. Maybe that was why a number of them were still able to resist the black wave.

Regardless, Adachi had definitely seen Max, Ducky, and Aidan all swallowed up by the enemy. The two clan leaders had been the driving force for the

leading group. Now they'd lost them both at the same time.

This is bad. We may be screwed.

Just as Adachi was thinking that, their enemies, that black wave, scattered in all directions.

"What...?!" Renji shouted as he forced the hostile black creatures away with the sword of Ish Dogran.

What was going on? *Figure out the situation and report back.* That was what Adachi needed to do, but he truly didn't understand.

The hostile black creatures had swallowed up Max, Ducky, and many others, and were currently devouring the leading group.

They were bearing down on Britney now. But as Adachi watched, the creatures were knocked back.

What was that?

Had Britney kicked them away on his own?

No.

Probably not.

"Urgh!"

Britney tried to rise again, but fell on his backside once more. His body wasn't following his orders. It was probably the same for the rest of the volunteer soldiers too. Jin Mogis had done something, and it had left them all enervated. Some had tried to brandish their weapons, but they were hunched over like they'd suddenly turned into feeble old men. They couldn't put up a proper fight like that. And yet, the aggression of the hostile black creatures had clearly waned. Also, that man was gone. The key figure in all this, Jin Mogis, was nowhere to be seen.

"Wha...!" Adachi's eyes widened as he looked around.

Something was moving. Fast. Incredibly fast.

It wasn't small. It was quite big, actually. What was it doing? Jumping back and forth around the leading group? There was a constant clamor of whooshing

sounds and hard impacts. He couldn't see clearly what it was doing. It was much too fast for that. Or maybe *they* were too fast. It might have been multiple things, not just one.

It, or they, was scattering the hostile black creatures. A path to the main gate was forming. The space had been filled with black enemies just a moment ago, but now they were parting. The flow had changed.

The enemy was still targeting Renji, so Team Renji's situation hadn't changed all that much. Still, the pressure on them had let up a little, even if it wasn't a massive shift.

The hostile black creatures were being exterminated by someone who was moving faster than the eye could follow, and the center of the action was shifting away from the leading group, toward the main gate.

"Which means..."

He had no definitive proof due to the limits of his vision, but in this situation he didn't need it to be sure he was right. Adachi's brain had put the pieces together.

"That's Jin Mogis!"

Jin Mogis had done something by chanting "*nostarem sanguis sacrifici.*" That was what had made the leading group collapse. Several of them had fallen prey to the enemy, but his actions had done more than just endanger the volunteer soldiers. That probably hadn't been his goal. In exchange for putting them at risk, Jin Mogis had gained power. A special power that let him move about at inhuman speeds, mowing down the hostile black creatures.

It was still difficult to believe, but for now it was probably best to set aside his feelings of surprise, as well as his common sense about how things worked, and reach a conclusion based purely on the facts at hand. He couldn't let his thoughts be hampered by quibbles like, *No, that can't be. There's no way he could have done that. It's impossible.*

Besides, Adachi knew there was a way for people to do things that seemed impossible—or a type of equipment, rather, that allowed them to.

"Relics!"

At that moment, it all fell into place. A relic. Jin Mogis had a relic and he'd used it.

Relics came in a wide variety of shapes and sizes, but some of them could do incredible things. With the right relic, you could do the impossible.

Also, the hostile black creatures had been after Jin Mogis. Just like they were after Renji. Because of a relic. Renji had a relic too. He was wearing Aragarfald. Those two relics were the key here.

"Renji, take off Aragarfald!"

Adachi might have been asking for something unreasonable. Aragarfald covered Renji's torso, arms, and legs. But it wasn't like normal armor, which would have had clasps all over it.

The original owner of Aragarfald had been an aberrant warrior, the terrifying sword fiend Arago, who'd stood over two meters tall. That was a massive difference in height from Renji. And yet, something surprising had happened as Renji approached the fiend's remains after slaying him. The armor the warrior had worn had all come off his body and crawled toward Renji. Adachi and the rest of the party had all warned him to get away from it, but Renji hadn't listened. The armor of the sword fiend had moved as if it were alive, stripping off Renji's other armor. Renji hadn't put on Aragarfald. The demonic armor had wrapped itself around him as if it possessed a will of its own and was choosing a new owner for itself.

If Renji gave the order, Aragarfald would fall off him. That said, they were in the middle of a battle now. What kind of idiot would take off his armor mid-battle?

"Ron!" Renji shouted, sweeping away the hostile black creatures with the sword of Ish Dogran and jumping backward. "Cover me!"

"Yeah, you got it!"

Ron moved up in front of Renji. Sometimes Ron talked about "removing his limiter." According to him, there was a switch inside his buzz-cut head. Normally it was on, but once he flipped it off, he totally snapped.

"Urah, urah, urah, urah, urah, urah, urah, urah, urahhhh!" Ron

swung his greatsword around like it was a toothpick. It goes without saying, however, that his giant cleaver was *not*, in fact, a toothpick. Once an object started moving in a specific direction, inertia got involved, and it took a considerable amount of strength to stop it. Basically, under normal circumstances, once a massive sword like that started swinging, it needed to swing all the way through. Stopping it before finishing the swing would require the wielder to really brace himself. That was how it should have been, but with his limiter removed, Ron must have been able to unleash incredible bursts of strength or something. However he did it, he was able to swing with inhuman strength, stop his blade, jump up, swing down, stop, and jump again. All of this at terrifying speeds.

Ron would close his eyes whenever he did it. He wasn't looking at his opponents, his targets. He was just swinging about at random. He swung and he swung, hoping to get lucky. That meant the enemy could just stay out of his reach. Simply move away from him. It didn't matter how powerful he was if he couldn't hit them. If his opponents could understand that, then Ron releasing his limiter made little difference. It might work if he caught them by surprise, but beyond that it was of no use other than to intimidate them.

But the hostile black creatures fell for it. Many of the enemies had humanoid forms. They moved in a manner similar to humans too. But some of the enemies were different. There were these slug-like, or perhaps snake-like, creatures too. What were they? That was a total unknown, but in any case they apparently didn't have the ability to detect a threat and get out of the way.

The enemy immediately charged Ron as he stepped in front of Renji. Was attacking Renji the only thing on their minds? Or did they not think at all? Whatever the case, they would make ideal prey for Ron with his limiter removed. The hostile black creatures were all sent flying by Ron's massive butcher's knife. He couldn't keep it up for long, but it would be long enough.

"Aragarfald!" Renji commanded, thumping a fist on his breastplate. It was almost instantaneous. Renji didn't take Aragarfald off. It looked more like the demonic armor was opening its ominous maw and ejecting Renji from inside it.

Renji was only wearing the clothes that had been under his armor now. Aragarfald was behind him, kneeling. It looked almost like a headless knight—a

dullahan.



“Whoa!” Ron jumped to the side and rolled. He must have been at the limits of his breath and stamina.

“To the gate!” Adachi shouted and started dashing.

Renji jumped over to Ron and pulled him to his feet. Chibi cast some sort of spell on Ron too.

Things went just like Adachi had expected. The hostile black creatures didn’t get in Team Renji’s way. For a moment, he turned to look back at Aragarfald. The enemy was swarming over the demonic armor. Like he’d thought, it was the relics. He still had no idea what these enemies were, but they were after the relics.

“What about them?!” Ron shouted. He must have meant the members of the leading group, who were hunched over or lying on the ground.

Renji rushed over to a female volunteer soldier who was just barely managing to stay on her feet.

“Kajiko, can you move?!”

“Renji... I don’t need your concern!” The leader of the Wild Angels started snapping orders at the other female volunteer soldiers.

Britney was gazing up to the sky. “What in the world happened?!”

“Doesn’t matter! Head for the gate!”

With Renji yelling at them, Britney and the other volunteer soldiers helped their comrades to their feet, encouraging each other as they tried to regroup. Their movements were still noticeably sluggish, though. These were elite volunteer soldiers. All of them had been through some truly difficult battles before. Even mages like Adachi, while they might not have been cut out for melee combat, had the stamina to keep walking all night and all day. Or they should have. Now that was all gone.

Had it been stolen, perhaps? It seemed Jin Mogis was still racing around at super speed, eliminating the hostile black creatures. Adachi’s kinetic vision wasn’t good enough to catch him. However, there were enemies that weren’t part of the swarm going after Aragarfald, and they kept on starting to move in

one direction, then shifting to head in another. It looked like they were confused, not just wandering. Meanwhile, explosive impacts kept sounding out all over, each one sending another hostile black creature flying.

“The enemy won’t come for us!” Adachi said, raising his voice. He sounded weirdly shrill, but what did he care? “Hurry! Get to the gate! Keep moving!”

Renji, Ron, Chibi, and a number of the Tokkis—all of the people on their side who could still move freely—were assisting their comrades. Adachi was too. He’d lend his shoulder to a volunteer soldier, get them walking, and then give them the push they needed to start running.

Team Renji was more important than anything to Adachi. He valued Renji, Ron, and Chibi over himself, and didn’t want to lose another member of the team ever again. Honestly, he wished he could focus on just his own party. But he couldn’t leave the other volunteer soldiers here to die. That would be wrong. Not out of humanity or a sense of camaraderie. Adachi wasn’t that emotional.

Renji had taken off Aragarfald for him without questioning it. He’d been so happy to see it that he had almost teared up. Maybe he had actually cried a little. Now, *that* was him getting emotional. This was different. Adachi was only looking at the other volunteer soldiers as potential assets in combat. It goes without saying, but more was always better when it came to battle. The more volunteer soldiers who made it out of the main gate, the brighter their prospects would be going forward. He wanted to secure as much fighting potential as he could. So that was the only reason he was doing this.

The survivors were finally about to make it through the gate. Adachi might not have been at the vanguard, but he was near the front. There were a number of torches placed high on the walls around the main gate. Thanks to them, Adachi could more or less see what the situation was like in the area.

The main gate, which had been forcibly opened inward, was still jam packed with hostile black creatures, with more of them rushing through by the second.

The volunteer soldiers were supposed to break through that? Was it even possible? Adachi couldn’t imagine it was. No, it wasn’t just him. None of them could. And yet the survivors kept running headlong toward the gate. Weren’t they being reckless? This was suicide. Was there no other way? Adachi

questioned it, but the survivors didn't stop. And being in the middle of the press, Adachi couldn't either.

It wasn't like Adachi had forgotten about Jin Mogis. What was he doing now? This was all his fault, wasn't it? Adachi would resent the man forever after what he'd done. No, nothing could be expected from him. It seemed unlikely that Jin Mogis would do anything that might cause things to change for the better.

Which was why what happened next took him by surprise. Some humanoid figure raced past the survivors at an incredible speed, then charged into the main gate. It blasted away all the hostile black creatures that had been blocking the gate as they streamed in, pushing them back out.

As if on a fixed course, the survivors ran through the main gate. Some of them were surprised, and Adachi even let out a "Wha?!" but they kept on running until they were outside. The darkness spread out before them.

The wind was fairly strong. The skies, cloudy. Dawn was still a long way off, and both the red moon and the stars were nowhere to be seen. Grimgar was blanketed in an impenetrable darkness, too thick for the lights atop Riverside Iron Fortress to pierce.

Adachi drew the short staff that hung at his hip and began drawing elemental sigils in front of him.

"Delm, hel, en, trem, rig, arve."

A single line of flames rose up, stretching toward the darkness. It wasn't just the darkness of night spread out before the survivors. Doubtless, the entire area would be awash in hostile black creatures too. Adachi hadn't used the Firewall spell to attack them, though. Unfortunately, it seemed that the survivors' enemies couldn't be burned away with Arve magic. Adachi was just hoping to use the light of the fire to identify how many of them were out there.

Two or three other mages also cast Firewall.

A total of four walls of fire appeared in a sunburst pattern extending out from the main gate.

The survivors gulped.

The hostile black creatures were *everywhere*.

Black forms blotted out the ground. *No, that can't be right*, Adachi's reason argued. *Look closer*. The survivors were currently standing on the ground, after all. Some of them were shouting "whoa" and kicking away one of the black things that had wrapped itself around their leg, or "take this!" and beating them back with their weapons. If the survivors stayed put, they might end up buried in enemies, whether it was the humanoid ones or the crawling ones, but that hadn't happened yet, at least. There was grass, dirt, and stones exposed here and there. It was a bad situation, but they weren't completely out of places to stand.

"Jin Mogis..." Adachi murmured. His throat was tight, and his voice escaped like a groan.

There was a red-haired man standing between two of the walls of fire that stretched into the darkness, his back turned to them. His sword was drawn.

"Hrmm..." Jin Mogis let out a low groan. Then, immediately after that...

He vanished.

Jin Mogis was gone.

No, not just him. Two of the walls of fire disappeared too.

Adachi's eyes couldn't make it out, but it seemed to him that something like a whirlwind had instantly formed where Jin Mogis was standing. That had blasted away the walls of fire and the hostile black creatures.

"How can he move like that?! Is that guy even human?!" Ron shouted.

"Wah-hah!"

Someone laughed in the darkness. Was that human laughter? It was presumably Jin Mogis, but it sounded so bizarre. If a laugh were to escape not just from someone's mouth, but their eyes, nose, and ears as well, it might have sounded like that.

"Incredible! So this is what it means to be set free from one's humanity! What a shame that I can only use it once more!"

There was something pale and blue shining in the dark. Adachi squinted. It

wasn't a large light. It was quite small, actually. He couldn't say for certain, but it was probably Jin Mogis. Was part of the man's body shining? Or was it something he was carrying, perhaps? Something like a jewel, maybe. Like a necklace, or possibly a ring.

A stone.

A jewel.

A shining rock.

"Is that the relic?!"

Jin Mogis *had* used a relic. One that had sapped dozens of volunteer soldiers of their strength, only to add it to Jin Mogis's own, no doubt.

"I can only use it once more!"

What did he mean by that? That it wasn't unlimited? That relic had a usage limit. Also, its effects weren't permanent. They were on a timer. It must have had a limited range too. That was why it hadn't drained Team Renji.

But it had one use left.

Meaning, Jin Mogis could do the same thing again.

If that man used his relic again, this time *all* the survivors would be sapped of their strength. Adachi hadn't experienced it himself, so he couldn't say for certain, but it had managed to knock down many experienced volunteer soldiers, so it was unlikely that any of them could resist it. Jin Mogis would then have superhuman strength, even if there was a time limit on it.

With his first usage, the man had gotten out of Riverside Iron Fortress. What would he do with the second? Adachi's prediction was that he'd use it to ditch the survivors and flee. Probably try to get as far as he could while the effect lasted.

Jin Mogis had never seen the volunteer soldiers as allies or comrades to begin with. They barely even rated as disposable pawns. The man had always been willing to sacrifice them if it came down to it. If that relic had a usage limit, then he would probably avoid using it if at all possible, but would still use it if forced. The man had needed sacrifices. And those sacrifices were the volunteer soldiers

of Riverside Iron Fortress.

“Renji!”

They had to kill him. That man needed to die immediately. If they didn’t snuff him out before he could use the relic, then the survivors would be wiped out for sure this time.

Once they killed him, what then? That didn’t matter. Well, no, it did, but Renji—or someone else, it didn’t have to be Renji—needed to kill Jin Mogis first.

Renji understood what Adachi was getting at even without a full explanation, and he wasn’t the only one. Ron and a number of the other volunteer soldiers sprang into the darkness after the maniacally laughing Jin Mogis.

“Whoa!”

There was a light. A different one. Not the pale blue light of the relic, but one that was closer to white. The light grew, and now Adachi was able to see Jin Mogis. The light was in the middle of his chest. Was it a blade? Something like a sword? A sword of light, piercing through Jin Mogis.

“Gworgh! Hurgh...”

Jin Mogis coughed up a gout of blood. The red-haired man attempted to raise his trembling left hand. The ring sat on his index finger, harboring a pale blue light with a petal-like pattern floating in it.

“Nosta...rem...”

Jin Mogis was no doubt trying to say the incantation. It was probably the key phrase to trigger that relic. But he couldn’t do it. The blade sticking out of his body wouldn’t let him speak. His feet rose from the ground as the sword of light lifted him up high, leaving him suspended like a hanged man.

The sword of light wasn’t an independent entity. Clearly, it hadn’t impaled Jin Mogis and lifted him aloft on its own. It had a wielder. There was someone over there, behind Jin Mogis, who was responsible. It was hard to tell in the darkness, but whoever it was carried a shield giving off a dim glow in addition to the sword of light. The figure looked human. It wasn’t a giant, at least. They weren’t particularly large or small. A solitary swordsman, seemingly clad in the

darkness of night.

“San...gui...” Jin Mogis tried to finish the key phrase between coughs of blood.

The night-clad one began to rise into the air with Jin Mogis still impaled on their sword of light. The figure was riding on darkness, on some sort of black thing. Like a dark knight on a black horse. Was it all one single being? Or was there a separate creature pushing the figure upward?

The night-clad one swung the sword of light diagonally to their rear, throwing Jin Mogis off it. There was no sound as the man impacted the ground, because it wasn't the ground that broke his fall. It was the black things.

“Oagh, argh!” Jin Mogis's death cry was short-lived.

The night-clad one approached the volunteer soldiers silently. As did the black things that had swallowed up Jin Mogis. Were they going to attack? The survivors had no relics. Would they still not be spared?

“The seventh—”

As soon as Adachi opened his mouth, he realized that this plan had been stuck in some corner of his head the whole time. It would be impossible to fight their way through the night-clad one's forces to freedom. No matter how lucky they got, none of them would get out alive.

The seventh tower. One of Riverside Iron Fortress's fourteen towers, the seventh, had an escape route that led outside the fortress. Britney and the Wild Angels had been defending the seventh tower, but had been forced to retreat. What was it like there now? He didn't know. He couldn't say he had much hope for it, but they faced certain doom if they kept trying to push forward here. The same went for if they tried to hold their ground. That meant they had to gamble on the escape route out of the fortress.

“Everyone, turn back to the seventh tower! Hurry!” Adachi screamed. Some of the survivors turned instantly. *It's time*, thought Adachi. During this battle, he hadn't wasted his magic. He'd been conserving his power. This was the moment to use it. Sure, he couldn't harm the enemy with magic. But he could smash buildings and other things to block their pursuit. Adachi could stay behind and start wreaking mass destruction in order to buy a few minutes for the rest of

the party to flee. If he felt that was what was best for Renji—and for Team Renji—he wouldn't hesitate.

For starters, he'd blow up the main gate once the survivors had all pulled back into the fortress, crushing the night-clad one in the rubble, if possible.

"What are you doing, Adachi?!" Renji shouted at him.

Renji's silver hair was so pretty. So were his pale eyes.

Once, Adachi had asked, *So, that's your natural color?*

Seems like it, Renji had replied.

Thinking back, they'd had almost no deep conversations that really touched on who they were as people. Maybe not even one. Neither Renji nor Adachi accepted others easily, and they never actively tried to get closer to anyone either. As Sassa had pointed out, Adachi had fond feelings for Renji—impulses and desires he felt he had no choice but to hide.

What about Renji? Did he feel anything like that?

Adachi wished he knew.

He'd been by Renji's side for so long. He should have asked, even if he'd had to force himself to. There was no way Renji had feelings for him. He couldn't possibly love him back. But even if it made Renji hate him, he should have tried to learn more. He wished he had.

"Okay, let's go!"

With a nod to Renji, Adachi headed for the main gate.

"O Light, O Lumiaris, bestow the light of protection on my blade!"

The reason he'd stopped was because someone had jumped out from within the group of survivors.

Were they going to attack the night-clad one?

Who was it?

Britney?

"Saber!"

Britney's sword was wreathed in blinding light. Saber. That was a paladin's light magic.

The night-clad one was riding atop a four-legged black thing. Adachi had thought it was like a horse at first, but it lacked a neck or head. Regardless, that mount was still giving the night-clad one a height advantage over Britney. It wouldn't be easy to land a blow on them.

"I was getting bored, only having these creepy things to fight!"

The way Britney moved wasn't that quick, but it was flexible and strangely fluid. The night-clad one swung down at Britney with the sword of light, but couldn't hit him. It was a close shave, though. Britney had likely side-stepped the incoming slash with the bare minimum of movement, then quickly clambered up the back end of the headless horse to where their enemy was situated. Britney had gotten behind them now.

"Play with me, would you?!"

Britney held his sword in both hands as he slammed it right into the night-clad one's neck. Yet the enemy only quivered a little, then twisted around to bash Britney with their dimly glowing shield. Britney had to nimbly jump out of the way to avoid it, doing a spin in midair. The enemy must have been watching to see where he'd land, because they immediately turned their horse to charge toward him.

"Sacrifice!"

That was a paladin. Not Britney, though. Another paladin rushed in, his shield shining brightly, and stopped the headless black horse in its tracks. He even managed to push it back a little.

"I'm getting in on this too, Bri-chan!"

"Tokimuneeee?!"

That voice was Kikkawa. Of the Tokkis. It was Tokimune who'd backed up Britney.

"You know what you're getting into, right?! Silly boy!"

Having landed safely with some help from Tokimune, Britney began drawing

some sort of figure with the tip of the sword that he'd cast Saber on and chanting a spell. It was the hexagram that symbolized Lumiaris.

"O light, O Lumiaris! Grant us determination!"

Adachi had tried to learn the names of every spell he could find, even the light magic ones that only priests and paladins could use. But this one was new to him.

"Alter!" Britney and Tokimune shouted in unison. But it wasn't just their voices that came together. Their swords collided. When they did, a shimmering red light started to emanate from the two paladins. Normally, the blessings of Lumiaris didn't have any particular color. They were pure white. Not this one, though.

The guiding light, Alter.

There was something different about it.

"Retreaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat!" someone roared at an unbelievable volume. Adachi's ears hurt. For a moment, he even questioned the sense of whoever had shouted like that all of a sudden.

"But—!" Kikkawa started to protest, but Tada grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and sprinted for the main gate. Had that shout come from Tada? Anna of the Tokkis and their mage Mimori followed him. There ought to have been a creepy guy with a ponytail with them too, but he was nowhere to be seen.



It was Adachi who had directed everyone to get to the seventh tower as quickly as possible. Still, he had to question the way the Tokkis ran without looking back. Were they leaving Tokimune behind? Was Altera *that* kind of magic, then?

Blood Spell, which Adachi had learned on the Red Continent, used his own blood as a catalyst. Obviously, if he overused it, he'd get anemic, and in the worst-case scenario could even die of blood loss.

There was some incredible magic out there. Secret arts only taught to a select few, which shortened the caster's life span or used it up entirely in exchange for astonishing power.

Adachi was aware of another one, Crime, which instantly healed all of the paladin's own wounds in exchange for completely losing the blessings of Lumiaris. Maybe Altera was a spell along the same lines.

Britney and Tokimune were probably about to pay a great price. They'd cast Altera. There was no taking that back. Tada understood that, and that was why he'd headed for the seventh tower without hesitation, right? If so, here's what Adachi had to think: Britney and Tokimune were laying their lives on the line to hold back the night-clad one and the countless other hostiles. They were casting their own lives away in order to save as many people as possible.

It seems this wasn't the right moment after all, Adachi thought as he ran. He'd been prepared to do it, but Britney and Tokimune had beaten him to the punch. That meant it wasn't Adachi's time yet.

"I love every last one of you!"

Though Britney's voice tugged at him from behind, Adachi didn't look back. He needed to make it to the seventh tower no matter what. Needed to get Renji, Ron, and Chibi there. For the sake of Team Renji, he needed to make sure as many people escaped the fortress as possible. What could he do to ensure that? Adachi pumped his legs as he thought about it. Renji's back was in front of him. Ron's too. And Chibi was running alongside him. He didn't feel an ounce of fear. He wasn't afraid of what he'd lost, or what he might lose in the future. Ridiculous as it might seem, in this moment, Adachi felt satisfied.

0113A660. What You and I Want

Hiyo was climbing a spiral staircase. There was no apparent source of light, but it wasn't dark. Not that it was bright either. There was just a spiral staircase rising through a void. It did have a handrail, though, so unless she was exceptionally careless, there was no risk of her falling off the sides.

What would happen if she fell? Hiyo didn't know. She'd climbed up and down these stairs hundreds, thousands of times, maybe more, but she had never tried jumping over the railing.

Hiyo wasn't alone. Following her up the stairs was a little woman named Io, who happened to not be half bad in the looks department, shortness aside. Hiyo had an eye for beauty, and she had to acknowledge that Io qualified. She loved people who were beautiful, regardless of race or gender.

Now, the woman's two flunkies? They were no good. Awful, actually. How could anyone be that ugly?

"Hey, you. How far are we going?" Io's voice didn't echo. There were no echoes in this space. She was climbing the stairs just two steps behind Hiyo, but even from such a short distance, her voice sounded muffled.

"We're almost there, okay?" Hiyo's voice didn't echo either when she responded. Their footsteps sounded like heartbeats.

"These stairs sure are creepy, huh?"

Hiyo was happy to see Io so unconfident. Joining up had been the former volunteer soldier's choice. She didn't even mind letting the woman's hideous henchmen tag along. If being all alone made Io uneasy, then the girl was welcome to bring them. Hiyo had no intention of talking to anyone but Io, because there was no point in chatting with the girl's disgusting goons. She'd chosen to let Io decide what to do with them, and they didn't matter to Hiyo one bit beyond that.

Still, Hiyo had expected Io to challenge her when provoked, because she knew

Io wanted information more than anything.

Io hadn't been serving the master for long. And yet, he already seemed to value her over a long-time supporter like Hiyo. That said, Io's knowledge of this tower was limited. She didn't even know how this spiral staircase worked. There was a massive gap in the quality and amount of information available to the two of them. Io was no idiot. She had to have some suspicion that the master was just making it look like he valued her over Hiyo in order to win her trust. He had a silver tongue, after all, and was gifted at controlling people.

Additionally, Io had been one of the volunteer soldiers' top priests, so Hiyo knew she'd have an inflated sense of self-worth. Io was used to having a bunch of worthless male orbiters tending to her every need, but she never opened her heart to any of them. Nor did she grant them access to her body.

Though she didn't know it all, Hiyo had a great deal of information about something Io had forgotten—the woman's past, which had been erased by the master's secret drug.

The master had tasked Hiyo with gathering intel on all the volunteer soldiers. When she was bored, she had inquired into their activities on her own time as well. She wasn't allowed to get close to any individual volunteer soldier without the master's orders, but she had time to monitor them.

The railing of the spiral staircase came to an abrupt end.

Hiyo stopped and turned back. "We're heeeere."

Io looked at the spot with no railing and scowled. "I'm not seeing anything..."

"Funny, isn't it? This tower is totally messed up. Did you know? A long, long time ago, they called it the *stake*."

"The stake..."

"It's been sticking out of the ground here since way, way, way back. Before Alterna, before even Damuro. When humans first arrived, the stake was already standing here."

"How do you know that?"

"How long do you think Hiyo's been in Grimgar?"

“I wouldn’t know... I mean, I’ve lost my memory. But you’re...older than me, right?”

“I see you’re watching your words. You’re so adorable when you’re by yourself, Io-san. I like it. Playing the cute little kitten suits you. Even if it is just an act.”

Hiyo extended her right hand out toward the break in the railing. She didn’t feel anything. There really was nothing there. And yet, Hiyo’s right hand seemed to be swallowed by the void. From the wrist down, and then the elbow down, Hiyo’s right arm was gradually vanishing.

“Wha...” Io’s pretty face twitched with distress. Oh, this was good fun.

“Come along, would you? It’s not dangerous,” Hiyo smiled and then hopped over to the other side.

Hiyo appeared in a spacious, dimly lit room. It wasn’t like passing through an invisible doorway. Rather, it was more along the lines of suddenly having been transported there, in the sense that Hiyo hadn’t entered at the edge of the room. No, she was more or less right in the center of it.

Io soon appeared behind Hiyo, her eyes widening as she quickly took in her surroundings and tensed up like a timid cat.

“Where are we?”

“Something like a warehouse, you might say.”

Hiyo started walking.

The ceiling here was fairly high. It had to be seven, maybe eight meters up. The room was twenty-four or twenty-five meters wide, and close to twice that long. There were a number of round lamps emitting enough greenish light to let them see what was around their feet, but not so bright as to illuminate the entire room. Still, even at a glance, it was clear this place wasn’t totally empty.

The room was filled with a great many things in a wide variety of shapes and sizes, densely distributed all over the place.

Some were spherical, others cubic. Some were flat, some thick, and others more complex shapes. Some looked like furniture, others were obviously

swords or armor, or seemed like they would make decent weapons. There were what appeared to be stationery supplies laid out on a table. There were containers, big and small. Both clay jars and glass bottles. Some were empty, while others were lidded, hiding whatever contents they might have held. There were bottles filled with liquids too. And sometimes that liquid had something floating suspended in it. Or things that had sunk to the bottom. There were shelves. Books too. And scrolls. Some of the objects looked like they would still run if you'd just plugged them in. A wireless radio. A TV. A telephone. Even Hiyo didn't recognize some of the electronics. There were framed paintings. Statues and clay sculptures. Notably, all of these more special items were safely stored in their own particular areas, rather than being scattered at random.

There was a space in the center of the room with no objects, from which a grid of pathways spread out like the lines on a go board. Hiyo and Io started walking along one of those pathways.

Hiyo had seen the master bring things in here and had helped him do so herself too. She'd even come here alone to drop off some smaller items at his direction. The amount of stuff just kept growing. It was getting cramped in here, though there were other rooms in the stake. Hiyo knew of at least two that were empty, so they weren't going to be running out of storage space any time in the immediate future.

The current situation being what it was, it would be difficult to go out and track down potential relics, or things that weren't fit to be called relics but could be of otherworldly provenance. In other words, their problem for the time being was that they *weren't* going to be able to fill up this room.

Or maybe the master had foreseen a situation like this?

"It's all so mysterious..." Io murmured.

Hiyo sat down on a red couch she'd happened to be looking at. It was a bit dusty, but that was nothing she couldn't put up with. According to the master, all the rooms in the stake, not just this one, were climate controlled, with systems to clean the air and maintain a constant temperature.

"Have a seat?" Hiyo suggested, patting the spot next to her.

Io hesitated a moment, but nodded and came over to join Hiyo.

“This couch...” Hiyo said, lying against its backrest and staring up at the ceiling. “It was a relic, you know. Master spent a long time studying it. It had the power to make the person sitting on it disappear, like a magician’s trick.”

“I could see you just fine, though.”

“It’s just a plain old couch now. Relics, they have this special energy in them called elixir. Although, I’m just repeating what I’ve heard from the master. Maybe he named it himself, or maybe he learned it from someone else. Hiyo couldn’t tell you one way or the other. I’ve been serving him for a long time, but it’s not like he tells me *everything*.”

“So, this couch...it lost its energy?”

“More like the master tore it out.”

“Your...master?”

“Oh, you silly girl. He’s *your* master too, isn’t he?”

“Oh, yeah. That’s what I decided, and I don’t think I made the wrong choice.” Io’s reply was instant, and it came with a smile. Whenever she tried to fake a smile, no matter how carefully crafted it was, her eyes would look dead, but right now they were sparkling. What a perfect grin.

“It was Master and Hiyo that stole your memories, though.”

“You had your reasons, right?”

“There are some things people are better off not knowing. The human race originally came from another world. Then they clobbered the elves and dwarves who’d already built civilizations here and claimed the fertile plains for themselves. We’re invaders, you know?”

“Our ancestors were, you mean?”

“I don’t know about that. But you and the people with you understand the language they use in Grimgar, right? You can even read their script. Well, it turns out that the humans were the ones who first brought writing to Grimgar. It started to spread after they appeared. If you think about it, the invaders were probably your ancestors, right?”

Hiyo looked down at Io’s right hand resting on the seat of the couch, then

reached out with her left and placed it on top. For a moment, Io stiffened. But that was all. She didn't try to bat Hiyo's hand away.

"All sorts of things have happened. There's a long history here. Like a group of barbarians trying to take over Alterna. Knowledge isn't just a way for us to defend ourselves. It can be a weapon to hurt others, and a reason or motivation to do either."

"You've...seen that kind of thing happen?"

"Well, I haven't been watching as long as the master. I don't look *that* old, do I? Though, just between us..." Hiyo tightened her grip on Io's right hand. It was a pretty hand, not like one you'd expect from someone who used to be a coarse volunteer soldier. "I ought to be a shriveled old grandma by now, really. But I don't look it, do I?"

"You don't. Not at all."

"That's thanks to the master. It seems he's planning something unbelievable —no, that's not how I should say it... He's come up with something that's gonna be absolutely amazing. Something that'll make all the rewards he's given out to people like Hiyo who've had the honor of serving him look insignificant in comparison. Insignificant to him, that is. Not us. I think in every world with intelligent life, there must be people who wish to live longer or to fight off the effects of aging. Master won't teach us about them, but it sounds like there's plenty of relics that can do that kind of thing."

"Which means I could receive the same benefits..." Io squeezed Hiyo's hand in return. "If I keep showing my loyalty the way you have, that is."

"If you want it, Io-san... And if the master sees a need for it, he might just do that for you, yes. Do you want to stay young and beautiful?"

"I'm beautiful?"

"Yes, I think you're quite fetching."

"I didn't expect that."

"That I'd give you a sincere compliment, you mean?"

"It doesn't sound like you're lying."

“Because I mean it. Genuinely. Hiyo’s into girls, you know. Especially pretty ones like you.”

“So, you’re saying you want me?” Io’s eyes narrowed, her brow furrowing. The corners of her mouth turned up just a little.

Hiyo licked her lips. “This is how you work your magic on people, is it, Io-san?”

“What do you mean?” Io asked, betraying no emotion. Her hand, still gripping Hiyo’s, wasn’t tense at all. Io had played these games before, again and again, to manipulate men. Even with her memories gone, her skills hadn’t vanished entirely. “I’m just asking you. Do you want me? I couldn’t love someone disgusting, but you’re not so bad.”

“Even if I’m an old woman on the inside?”

“If you were a gross old granny, I’d stay away. But you don’t look like one.”

“You can’t seduce Hiyo, Io-san.”

“Oh, really?”

“Hiyo’s not what you really want, now is she?”

“What I...want?” For an instant, Io’s eyes lost focus. It looked like she’d been caught by surprise.

Men wanted Io. They desired her. The more they desired her, the more her value increased. Supply must never equal demand. If she always kept the supply of herself as limited as possible, demand would greatly outstrip it. When Hiyo had been observing Io, it had seemed as if the girl’s only goal was to preserve that imbalance. It probably was.

“What do *you* want, Io-san?” Hiyo pulled Io by the hand, drawing the girl a little closer to her. Io didn’t resist.

“Master told Hiyo she could show you this place. It’s a reward, basically. Even if everything here is just junk that’s been drained of elixir. There are other rooms filled with lots of treasure. Some that Hiyo can enter, and some reserved solely for the master.”

Hiyo gently rubbed her cheek against Io’s left shoulder. “If you do as he says, mayyyybe you’ll get to go back to your original world one day. Not that it’ll be

easy. I mean, even the master can't do that yet. Still, that's not the only reward he can offer. It's impossible to reverse aging, as far as Hiyo can tell, but we can prevent it..."

Now Hiyo rested her head on Io's right shoulder. Taking a breath, she adjusted her grip on the girl's hand, firmly intertwining their fingers so their palms were pressed together. "You do as the master says, and you'll want for nothing. The world outside is overrun by the sekaishu, but using the functions of the stake, we can still go out there. We can't predict what will happen if we do use them, though, so the master is being cautious. It sounds like they've never gone this wild before."

"So, what you're saying is...'Contribute more.' Is that it?"

"No. You've got it wrong."

"I do?"

"We have no choice but to serve the master. You know... Serve, and serve, and serve, and serve, and serve... Serve, and serve, and serve, and serve, and serve, and serve... We have to keep on serving him, endlessly."

Hiyo could distinctly feel Io's breath. It seemed to be a little hurried.

"Master has a grand ambition, you see. Even he doesn't completely comprehend the stake, and he can't make use of all of its functions. Master wants to fully activate the stake. It's why he gathers elixir. And Hiyo's worked her butt off to do that for him."

"And I'll be doing the same, huh?" Io said to herself.

Her eyes were lowered slightly as she looked forward. Not that there was anything in front of her that she was looking at. She was just gazing absently. Even if something were there, it would have made little difference.

"But if I'll be rewarded for my work, that's not so bad. It's better than nothing, at least."

"Do..." Hiyo brought her lips to Io's ear. "...you really think that?"

Io jolted and shuddered, looking sideways at Hiyo for an instant. The girl started to say something, but no words came out. Maybe she had thought

better of it and stopped herself.

Hiyo planted a little kiss on Io's forehead. It felt so soft and supple. She wanted to just eat the girl right up. The jealousy was unbearable.

Even if the master's gift had stopped Hiyo from aging, it was impossible to completely prevent the body's degeneration. Every time she found a new wrinkle, every time one deepened, she felt a renewed sense of urgency. Sometimes she even started to panic. Touching her body didn't feel like it once had. Even she could tell that. Her skin had been more supple a decade ago. And though her muscles hadn't gained any mass, they felt harder.

And besides, mentally and emotionally, Hiyo was most definitely aging. The more she tried to appear young and vivacious, the more she realized how awkward and forced her act was.

However much she served, however much she sacrificed, she couldn't stay young forever.

I'm not young anymore.

I'll never get those years back.

Every second I spend is a second I no longer have.

I can extend my lifespan, but it's still limited.

No, I'm not young anymore.

And it's possible that I've been wasting what time I have.

"Io-san, I..."

Hiyo whispered so close she was practically nibbling the girl's ear.



“I’m you, decades from now. Do you want to be like me? I know more about the master and the stake than you do. Little by little, step by step, I served, and served, and served, and served, and served, and served as he fed me teeny-tiny little pieces of the puzzle one at a time as bait. Putting them together, I’ve gotten to the point where I can say that I have a broader, deeper knowledge of Grimgar than the volunteer soldiers, the Arabakians, the elves, dwarves, orcs, and even most of the undead. Do you want to be like me, lo-san? Well, whether you want to or not, it’s all up to the master anyway. If I ever anger him, ever make him think he doesn’t need me anymore, he’ll cut me loose in a second. You might just be my replacement. Or maybe that Alice kid. Or Shihoru. It’s *all* up to the master. Do you want to be like me, lo-san? What *do* you want? What do you think will happen when we fully activate the stake? Even when the time comes, I doubt the master will tell me. Because I’m just a slave. The master’s loyal slave. Hey, lo-san, do you want to be like me?”

0117A660. Song of the End, Echo Far and Wide

Hundreds, maybe thousands of pitch-black chariots tore across the land, leaving behind dark tracks that didn't fade away. The grass of the Quickwind Plains that had long endured the harsh sun and the capricious gales so common to the area appeared to greet the invasion of the sekaishu with total indifference. The local beasts, however, had no such luxury.

Haruhiro and the party sometimes spotted an animal running in the distance. Not frequently. One, maybe two a day, at most. The birds were pretty much all gone. It was their sixth day on the Quickwind Plains, but neither Haruhiro nor Ranta had spotted a single bird flying in the sky. Occasionally, Yume or Itsukushima, whose eyes were much better, would point one out. That was how rare they'd become.

It was even hard to find animals that were usually common not just on the Quickwind Plains, but all across Grimgar, like round, fluffy, and thin-tailed chimos, or long-legged, rabbit-like pebies. According to Itsukushima, lizards and snakes were incredibly scarce too.

It couldn't have been much more than a month ago that they had traveled north across these plains as they headed toward the Ironblood Kingdom. Everything had changed since then. It was like they were in a different world entirely. Haruhiro and the party were moving south now. There was no avoiding the sekaishu, spread out across the land like black veins. The group sometimes had to step over them to proceed. Or jump over them, in some cases. Whenever they were cut off by a sekaishu vein that was like a broad ribbon, or that had formed into a thick pipe like a dragon's neck, they turned back just to be safe. So far, they had determined that the sekaishu wouldn't attack in response to physical stimuli, but that didn't rule out the possibility of danger.

Most sekaishu bodies appeared to be still, just staying where they were. However, they came across some that would shift around placidly. On a number of occasions, the group witnessed the string-like forms twining themselves

together to form something thicker. They also saw the remains of animals that had been half-swallowed by the sekaishu here and there.

It was best to keep their distance. Getting too close would be unwise.

The problem was that the sekaishu was everywhere.

The forms seemed to be crawling up from under the ground and were heading somewhere. The ones the party had seen in the Bordo Plains had been going east, likely toward the Kurogane Mountain Range and the Ironblood Kingdom. But it wasn't like all the sekaishu forms were going there. Some seemed to be heading north, others south. And they couldn't rule out the possibility that some were also traveling east or west too.

The Crown Mountains rose up ahead of the party. They took their name from the fact that their outline resembled a crown no matter what angle you viewed them from.

Alterna was one-hundred and fifty kilometers south and one-hundred kilometers west of the Crown Mountains.

That was where the group was headed. Or so Haruhiro thought, but he wasn't totally sure.

No, it had to be Alterna. They definitely needed to head back there first. That was what they had decided after talking it over multiple times.

His fever had receded, but his hands still ached. He'd decided not to talk about it. It wouldn't have helped anyway. Wouldn't have made them hurt any less. Honestly, he didn't want to talk at all.

Conveniently, Itsukushima and Yume were focused on monitoring the area around them and charting their course, and Ranta was keeping quiet so as not to get in the way. As for Poochie the wolf dog, he wouldn't bark if it wasn't necessary.

Even when someone did say something, Haruhiro stayed silent. Yume had prodded him frequently until a couple days ago, but he had only responded that he was fine, so she'd eventually stopped. Each time, Ranta had told her she should leave him alone. He never would have been grateful to Ranta for it, but the dread knight was correct. Haruhiro wanted her to leave him be.

Everything felt like too much of a burden now. Every feeling, whether it was painful, difficult, or sad, weighed Haruhiro down. He needed to do something. He knew that, but could only conclude that anything he did would be in vain.

They walked, and they walked, and they walked, but they would probably never reach their destination.

Destination?

Did they even have one?

A goal?

A purpose?

Some hope for the future?

A destination?

A path?

He could tell that whatever direction his body was facing was “forward,” and that was about all he understood at the moment. That he was moving forward, maybe. Forward. Step by step. And by half-steps when a full one was too much for him. That was what he’d been doing all along. He had believed he’d been walking as best he could. And where had it gotten him?

This sad state of affairs.

Haruhiro didn’t want to think. But try as he might, he couldn’t stop.

Everyone tries to make the right choice for the situation they’re in. They don’t want to get it wrong. They don’t want to screw it up. They would want to benefit from it, if possible. And even if it’s completely *impossible*, it’s hard for them to accept losing something. Nobody would want to see that happen. If they had to be hurt, had to have something taken from them, they would want to keep their losses to a minimum. To be able to think, *I might not have done the best I could have. But I tried. I did good.*

It was all in vain.

In the end, it was like Haruhiro had been digging a hole. Little by little, he dug, and dug, and dug, piling up the dirt next to it. He had even felt proud when he

looked down at the hole he'd gotten all sweaty making, or at the mound sitting beside it. It had felt like he'd been getting better at digging, and that pile of dirt sure had grown big. Wow. It was genuinely impressive. He really could do something if he set his mind to it.

And?

What about the hole?

What was it for?

Was it just a hole?

What had he been doing all this time? Digging a hole? That was it?

No, that's not true, someone might say to console him if he talked about it. All sorts of things had happened since he first awoke in Grimgar. He'd met people. Said goodbye to them. He'd seen so much. There were things he'd accomplished, working together with his comrades, right? Maybe he couldn't see it that way now, but each and every one of those moments must have had their own vibrant colors that made them shine. It wasn't like digging a hole that served no purpose. It hadn't all been for nothing. Even if, in the end, all that work went unrewarded, he shouldn't have denied the value of the process. If he did that, it would be like saying that everyone was going to die eventually anyway, so there was no point in living, and being born at all was completely meaningless.

Well, yeah, it is, Haruhiro thought. Meaning wasn't something that was just lying around. You had to find it. Even if all Haruhiro had been doing was digging a hole, if he could find meaning in the act of digging, then it wasn't meaningless. Digging wasn't all fun, but he'd had days when it had felt pretty satisfying. Haruhiro had seen meaning in those days.

Now, he was just empty.

No, the memories of the times when he'd enjoyed digging were now an actual torment.

If it was going to come to this, I never should have dug at all. If I was going to lose so much, I wish I'd never had anything, never wanted anything, to start with.

Time. What I need is time. That's how it was with Manato, and with Moguzo, wasn't it? I just need to tough it out for now.

And? How long do I need to endure? Can't I end it? Is that so wrong? Says who?

Sorry.

Should I apologize to Yume and Ranta?

Sorry. I can't do this anymore.

But that feels irresponsible. I don't know if it's okay for me to drop out now. I've still got the two of them. It'd be like running away. That's cowardly.

But...still, you know? Ranta's got Yume, and Yume's got Ranta, right? And Yume's got Itsukushima and Poochie too. What about me? Who do I have? What do I have?

Yeah, I know. I know how Yume and Ranta would feel if I ran out on them now. How it would hurt them. But still. Do I really have to try so hard for those two? Can't I run away? It's no big deal, right?

They don't have to do anything special. Just leave me alone. If they'd just do that, I'd be fine. I'm not gonna do anything. I'll just be here. Sitting. Then lying down, eventually. Once I lie down, I'm probably not getting back up. I doubt I'd be able to. But I'm fine with that.

That's what suits me.

I want to end it.

I want it over.

Let's end it.

Let it end.

I'm going to end it.

It's fine if I end it, right?

That'll be the end of things.

It'll just end.

The end is near.

Incredibly near.

So let's end it.

Don't anyone complain.

It's gonna end either way.

Let's all end.

Everything will end.

From the moment it started, it had to end eventually.

The beginning was the beginning of the end.

All that's left is for it to end.

The end is playing out before us.

No matter how I look at it, the sekaishu tearing up the Quickwind Plains is a scene from the end times.

Maybe there's no need to draw the curtains myself, because things are already heading toward the end.

It's going to end.

End.

Let it end.

I don't need to say anything, right?

I don't need anyone's permission, right?

No one has to accept it.

They just have to end.

They just have to let it end.

At some point, he sensed Poochie next to him. He'd thought he was imagining things. Maybe it was just a coincidence, but Poochie was sticking close to him, nuzzling up to his belly.

Go away.

Leave me alone.

I want to end it.

I'm just trying to let things end here.

Stop it.

I want to let it end, so don't get in the way.

Stop turning around and looking at me every now and then.

You stop too, Yume.

Don't come over and lean your shoulder against mine when we're resting.

Don't talk to me about old times.

And you too, Ranta.

Stop telling crude jokes and then laughing at them.

Itsukushima was gazing up at the stars. "I'm alive," he said.

"What's that about?" Ranta said, laughing.

Yume jumped to her feet and yelled, "Mewwwww! Yume's alive tooooooo!"

"Heh! You and me both!" Ranta shouted, like it was a competition. "I'm aliiiiive! How do ya like that, you pieces of shiiiiiiiit?!"

Stop it.

I want to let it end.

I'm trying to let it end.

I want to let it end, but for some reason I can't.

I don't know what I'm clinging to, what's keeping me here.

It should be simple.

I just have to let it end.

If I just do that, it'll be over.

I won't see anything.

I won't hear anything.

I won't feel anything.

There won't be anything.

And that's fine.

Let it all go away.

No regrets, no wishes. I don't need any of that.

Why can't I let it end?

What's holding me back?

I'm not scared. How could I be, given all I've been through? I have no lingering regrets. Nothing to dwell on. And if I did, all I'd want is to be rid of them. It'd be so much easier to let them end.

Morning is coming.

The morning will come once more.

The sun will rise over the land torn apart by the sekaishu.

I want to hold my knees and say goodbye to the sun as it peaks over the horizon.

This is the last time.

Goodbye, for real this time.

I promise you.

We won't meet again.

So, tell me.

Does shining down on us day after day without fail not feel empty to you?

You give this useless body of mine warmth, but I'll never be able to do a thing for you in return.

Have you never considered ending this cycle that brings you nothing?

The wolf dog poked him with its wet snout and licked his face. Its eyes seemed to know everything.

I don't know anything, he tried to mumble.

“We’re moving out, dumbass,” Ranta said, whacking him on the back of the head.

“Jeez! You’ve been told to stop doin’ that!” Yume protested, puffing her cheeks out, but Ranta screwed up his face, which still had horrible scars, and stuck out his bottom lip.

“I’m holding back, damn it! This falls within the realm of communication! Don’t be such a nag or I’m gonna kiss you!”

“You kissed Yume before, and she didn’t do nothin’ to deserve it then!”

“What?!”

“Whoaaaaaa! Old man! Don’t point your bow at me like that! I mean, wow, that was fast! You got your bow out and nocked that arrow so freakin’ quick! L-L-Listen! You’ve got it all wrong! Yume was spending too much time on stupid Parupiro, so I was like, I dunno, hey, I still exist! Or something! Okay?! I had to remind her! You’re a man too, so you get it, right?!”

“How should I know?” Itsukushima said.

“D-D-D-Don’t draw your bow all the way back like that!”

“No more kisses for you, Ranta!” Yume declared.

“Whaaaaaa?! No wayyyyyy! No kisses?! Forever?! Like, eternally?! Seriously?! Are you crazy?! I know you didn’t mind it!”

“It was real surprisin’. Not bad, but kinda sudden, y’know?”

“See! She didn’t mind it! Seeeee?!”

“Y-Yume...”

“The old man’s depressed! I’ve never seen a grown-ass man look so sad! Well, tough luck!”

“What’s wrong, Master? You okay?”

“It’s fine! Just fine, Yume! Having you console me now would only make it worse!”

“Ngh? Really?”

Maybe it's okay to end it, thought Haruhiro.

I'm just holding everyone back.

They can go on without me.

I can't walk.

I don't want to anymore.

I just can't say it.

I couldn't possibly bring myself to.

That's why I stay quiet and follow them.

I'm a mess.

Whatever happens, happens.

I just have to walk, right?

Fine, I'll walk.

Between these black tubes, these sekaishu things that start and end who-knows-where.

"Augh! Damn it!"

Ranta kicked the ground and did an about-face. The sekaishu had formed a lattice up ahead. It was going to be too difficult to step between them.

Ranta, Itsukushima, and Yume all turned to go and Poochie looked up at Haruhiro, who was just standing there.

Haruhiro started walking.

"Hey..." Ranta called after him.

Haruhiro kept walking as if he hadn't heard him. He didn't stomp down hard on the sekaishu. Just tread on them as he continued on his way. What did he have to fear at this point? He wasn't scared. He should've been doing this all along.

Let it end. Let's end it. I want to end it. Yeah.

Haruhiro was walking toward the end. That was what lay in the direction he

was going. How would it end? What would end? He didn't know. He didn't care. It would end eventually regardless. That much was certain.

Haruhiro kept his eyes fixed on the Crown Mountains in the distance as he walked on and on. It didn't matter to him if it was dirt, or grass, or sekaishu he was stepping on. It was all the same.

Ranta, Yume, and Itsukushima were chasing him. How were they going about it? Were they stepping on the sekaishu? It was none of his concern.

Poochie occasionally appeared in front of Haruhiro, though he sometimes disappeared out of view as well.

The closer he got to the Crown Mountains, the more the sekaishu blanketed the ground, the holes in the net they'd formed becoming smaller and smaller. The surface was almost completely covered in them.

At some point, the sun began going down. The eye-searing light couldn't illuminate the sekaishu. The worms had no luster at all. Their black was darker than darkness itself. It seemed endlessly deep, as if there were no bottom to it.

Haruhiro stood atop the sekaishu.

In front of him, there was only sekaishu and the twilight sky. He'd thought the Crown Mountains would be there. That he would see their shape that looked like a crown from whatever angle you viewed them.

No, those are the Crown Mountains.

The mountains were also covered in the sekaishu. He hadn't been able to tell from a distance. But there were things writhing in the foothills and halfway up the mountain. Were those part of the sekaishu? Was some amalgamation of sekaishu rising up and taking on those forms?

No, that's not it. Why did Haruhiro think they weren't? Because I know what those are.

Haruhiro had spotted them on the Quickwind Plains before. No, more than just spotted them. He had ridden on one's leg.

"Giants..."

It's the gangly giants.

Those giants, with their distinctive, gangly outlines, had wandered freely across the Quickwind Plains. They were so massive that it was impossible to tell what their faces were like when you looked up at them, but you could still imagine that they wore expressions like they thought they owned this place. Even if a great cataclysm had transformed the terrain of the Quickwind Plains, the gangly giants wouldn't have even flinched at it. They would surely still be strolling around at their relaxed pace long after the humans, elves, dwarves, and orcs had all died out.

Haruhiro sensed more than thought that the giants might have been closer to gods than to living creatures. But those gangly giants had been caught by the sekaishu.

At a glance, Haruhiro spotted two at the foot of the Crown Mountains, one more halfway up them, and another near the peak. Those were all the ones he saw standing, but the thing writhing on the ground several hundred meters ahead of him might have been a gangly giant too. Everything was pitch black, so it was impossible to completely tell it apart from its surroundings, but it looked like the blackened upper torso of a gangly giant sticking out of the ground. Maybe there was a depression there, and the gangly giant was in the process of falling in. It looked like a bug in an ant-lion's trap, trying not to get pulled down.

Perhaps there had always been holes in the foothills large enough for the gangly giants to get themselves stuck in. The sekaishu had come up from the bowels of the planet. Maybe those holes were where it had come from. Were there really holes like that? Haruhiro didn't know. He'd never seen one. And he didn't recall hearing about any from Itsukushima.

The sekaishu had been coming out of the bottom of a valley in the Bordo Plains too. Maybe this was where the sekaishu had emerged in this area? The Crown Mountains looked like they had become a sekaishu form themselves.

Maybe they had. Maybe it wasn't just the Crown Mountains. Something similar could be going on elsewhere too. There could be sekaishu emerging all over Grimgar. Maybe they were going to cover the entire landmass. Maybe the sekaishu was a disease Grimgar was afflicted with—an untreatable and ultimately fatal one. Maybe Grimgar was dying.

He didn't know. Haruhiro didn't know. How could he? Things might be coming to an end without him ending them. Maybe everything would be over soon enough regardless. *This might be the actual end.*

0118A660. To the Future

The black ones will come and swallow the world.

Lie in wait in the deepest depths until the black ones depart.

A new dawn awaits us after the calamity brought by the black ones.

This was the prophecy of a terrible future foreseen by the first ugoth sage, Togorogo, the finest specimen of the goblin race, a seer said to be unsurpassed to this day.

The duty of the mogado, the king of the goblins, was not simply to protect his race, allow them to prosper, and pass his authority on to the next generation. They also had to prepare for the calamity Togorogo had seen in his visions.

Togorogo had served the current mogado's tenth predecessor. That mogado had heeded his warning and started to excavate Ohdongo, the Deepest Valley. It was to be the place they would evacuate to when the calamity arrived. In time, Togorogo had died. The mogado's fifth predecessor had finally finished digging out Ohdongo, housing the ugoths there with all the treasures of their race in preparation for that day.

We must avoid a situation where all that remains of our race after the calamity passes is what little we can manage to hide in the Deepest Valley. That had been the thought of the mogado's fifth predecessor. Not all of us will make it through the calamity. Decisions will need to be made as to who should survive.

Mogado Gwagajin was in the deepest part of Ohdongo, unable to sleep a wink. The treasures of his people were on display here, with the seats of the ugoths set around his own throne and a colored drawing depicting the prophecy of Togorogo carved into the wall.

The mogado's fifth predecessor, who had expanded the vertical shaft of Ohdongo to add a horizontal shaft with eight rooms called this room, the deepest of them all, the Room of Prophecy. There was no way to reach it without going through the iron doors at the base of the vertical shaft and

passing through all the other rooms.

On one occasion, the mogado who came before Gwagajin went mad, believing the calamity was upon them, and shut himself in the Room of Prophecy. When he emerged some time later on his own, he started raving that the Room of Prophecy was cursed. It wasn't. While the door was shut, the Room of Prophecy was completely sealed, so the king had simply been struggling to breathe.

"There is poison in the air we goblins exhale, and staying in a place dense with that poison will make you drown as if you were underwater."

That fool of a king hadn't believed his ugoths when they'd presented him with this fact, but Gwagajin was different. When he ascended the throne, he immediately took their counsel and installed side passages between the eight rooms, as well as air tanks. They had learned that fire produced the poison too, so they started a crossbreeding program to produce the flying worms that gave off light, which had become their main source of illumination.

There were now countless lightworms flying around the Room of Prophecy, sharing their glow with Gwagajin, the ugoths, his five wives who were cowering in the corner, and the sixteen young princes.

Gwagajin had never thought that the day these preparations would be needed would come during his reign. He couldn't ignore the prophecy, but it had set no date for when the black ones would come. It might have been during his time. It might have been during the next king's, or five kings down the line. Perhaps even ten.

If that's the case, then rather than prepare for the day of prophecy, wouldn't it be better to boldly expand into the outside world?

If they were to expand beyond Damuro, there were problems that had to be tackled first. Nothing but problems, it might be fairly said.

For one thing, as a general rule, we're too short-lived.

Even those of royal stock, like Gwagajin, were doing well if they lived more than thirty hundredfold-days. Most goblins would be too weak to stand by the time they reached ten hundredfold-days. The ugoths were so long-lived that

some made it past forty hundredfold-days, but only because these highly clever goblins were singled out, kept from exercising, fed well, and carefully protected. The larger variety of goblin, the hobs—which were born on rare occasions—could live as long as those of royal stock, but they learned slowly and were incredibly stupid.

It's clear that we need to become wiser, but if most of us can only expect to live ten hundredfold-days, they can't learn much, and what they do learn will be lost when they die.

Gwagajin recognized that they were inferior to humans and orcs. When he'd become mogado, he had come to the conclusion that the biggest reason for that was the shortness of their lives.

Gwagajin sat silently on his throne in the Room of Prophecy. The ugoths surrounding him kept their mouths shut as well. His wives and the princes whispered to one another occasionally but mostly kept quiet. This was because it was important that they breathe out as little poison as possible while they waited in the Room of Prophecy for the calamity to pass them by.

When they'd received reports that the black ones had entered Damuro, Gwagajin had hesitated to evacuate to Ohdongo. Should he, the mogado, be fleeing into the Room of Prophecy while his people were panicking because the calamity they had long feared was now coming to pass? Against the warnings of his ugoths, Gwagajin had tried to halt the invasion of the black ones.

It had all been in vain. He had to admit that now.

There was no way to tell the time anymore, but Gwagajin had held out in Ahsvasin, the Highest Heaven, for six days and nights. However, when the black ones were finally about to reach Ohdongo, he was forced to make a decision.

Gwagajin had raced down the stairs that ran along the walls of the Deepest Valley with his retinue. Before they could even reach the bottom, the black ones were already starting to flow down the walls. He'd never forget the sight of the black ones raining down on them. He'd screamed, without shame or concern for appearances.

He'd sent his wives and the princes to Ohdongo days before, and the most important of the ugoths were assembled in the Room of Prophecy.

Gwagajin remembered the moment when the doors to the Room of Prophecy had been shut tight. He was sitting on his throne, surrounded by ugoths and treasure, painfully aware that, even with all his wives and princes around him, he was a king no more.

Gwagajin had regretted it ever since.

Perhaps he never should have moved from Ahsvasin. If only death awaited, then the Highest Heaven was where a king should meet it.

Ever since he had become mogado—no, even before then—the ugoths had been the only ones he could have a decent conversation with. When Gwagajin spoke to them of his belief that they too must become a long-lived race, they offered tepid rebuttals. Some even warned him that the privileged class would never stand for it and that he might face rebellion from his fellow royals.

But what had the royals ever done? Lived longer than the rest and spent that time pursuing their own pleasure? Those of royal stock bred with one another, while looking down on the shorter-lived members of their race as beneath them, immersing themselves in power struggles, gourmet food, and sexual indulgence. They made the short-lived kill one another, not seeing the cannibalism they engaged in as wrong. Were they not the worst of their own kind?

And Gwagajin came from that same royal stock.

“It’s the cannibalism,” Gwagajin murmured to himself.

The ugoths all hung their heads. A number of them had their eyes turned up to still look at the mogado.

The doors to the Room of Prophecy were creaking under some great pressure from the outside. They had been for some time now. First the ugoths, and then his wives and princes, had made a fuss about it, but now no one paid it any mind. Perhaps they had grown used to the terror.

“Royals and ugoths do not eat their own. Right? It’s the short-lived who eat one another. Royals are the descendants of those who stopped engaging in cannibalism a long time ago. My ugoths, I had you look into the causes of death for our people. For the short-lived ones, first they start to fear the night. Then

their limbs wither, and they begin to speak nonsense. Their speech grows slurred, they walk with difficulty, they become bedridden, and then they stop breathing. This is the typical death for one of the short-lived. Yes? But it's rare for a royal or an ugoth to die like this, isn't it? To the best of my knowledge, there has only been one. My uncle, the previous mogado, Bodojin. Bodojin engaged in eccentric behavior, cursing at everyone around him, clinging to the throne, and soiling himself as he foamed at the mouth. My ugoths, you must know. Bodojin had the awful habit of killing the short-lived and eating them. He was secretly engaging in cannibalism. Shouldn't we have stopped that practice as the first thing we did?"

Gwagajin wore a suit of armor from the treasury, with the crown on his head and the royal scepter in his hand. Not to mention every other shiny accessory that he could manage. But he wished he could throw them all away. These were not what Gwagajin had wanted.

"We should have banned cannibalism. We could have found a solution to the food crisis it would have resulted in. I knew we should have gone out into the world. We were too timid. Yes, the prophecy was right. Togorogo was a genuine seer. But we've had no seers since. In Togorogo's time, even the ugoths engaged in cannibalism. If they hadn't, Togorogo might have lived even longer. He could have seen more of the future, and shown us the way. If the short-lived can live as long as the royals when they don't eat each other, then we could have produced many intelligent and powerful individuals from their ranks. We would have been stronger and wiser for it, I'm sure. Without cannibalism, our women wouldn't need to fear that the children they have birthed and raised might be eaten. They wouldn't need to produce and throw away so many disposable young. We might have learned to value each and every one of our kind. It's not enough for me, royal Gwagajin, to think these things on my own. Our lives are too short to fully cultivate these ideas and pass them on. We needed to stop the cannibalism. Why didn't I see this sooner? Tell me, my ugoths. Was I, royal Gwagajin, a fool? Too foolish to realize?"

The assembled ugoths hung their heads and wept. His wives and the older princes cried. The younger princes were despondent.

The lightworms, which had likely lived for dozens of hundredfold-days, flew

rapidly around the Room of Prophecy.

Now it wasn't just the doors. The tiled floor of the room, the wall that bore Togorogo's vision of the calamity, the sturdy pillars and beams that held up the ceiling—no, the entire Room of Prophecy was shaking.

“Is there no tomorrow for us?”

Gwagajin could not hold back a sob.

“Where did we go wrong? What are the black ones? What is about to destroy us? My ugoths, I beg you, tell me. Was I, royal Gwagajin, a fool? If this is my fault alone, then let Gwagajin alone perish. What need is there to destroy us all? Don't wipe us out. O black ones, O calamity, please, do not kill us all. We'll stop the cannibalism. Our people can become wiser, stronger! Once, the No-Life King took us by the hand, held us close to his chest, and told us to rise with him—told us we could. Yes. We can stand for ourselves. We're no barbarians. At the very least, we're not willing to endure others calling us savages and looking down on us. We can move forward. If we have a future, we can walk. O calamity, don't destroy us. Give us a chance, please...”

The door which had been shut tight and barred several times was opening.

Gwagajin rose from the throne. The armor, necklace, earrings, bracelets, and other treasures which had been stored in the Room of Prophecy—and which Gwagajin now wore—supposedly harbored special powers inside of them. Some had been found at various places in Alterna. Others were treasures they'd received from trade with the humans in the past. Many had been brought by adventurers from parts unknown. Wasn't this the time to put their hidden powers to use?

“We cannot die out!”

Oh, the door was opening.

The black ones would rush into the Room of Prophecy.

Gwagajin raised his scepter.

“O treasures, give me your power!”

0119A660. You Are My Destiny

A castle like a white swan with folded wings was reflected in the black surface of the lake below it, illuminated by the light of many torches. Its owners called it the Swan Palace—Wehagoran, in the Orcish language.

Lake Gandah, which was shaped like a flattened gourd, was supposedly the largest lake in all of Grimgar. The Swan Palace and its castle town, Grozdendahl, the City of Battle Cries, were situated on the western shore of Lake Gandah, in the area where the neck of the gourd narrowed and twisted to the south in a unique way. Kuzaku and Setora, who found themselves on the southern shore now, were only five or six kilometers from the Swan Palace. It was a windless night, leaving the lake as smooth as glass and making it look as if there were another Swan Palace in its reflective surface.

Kuzaku crossed his arms and nodded repeatedly. “The stars are real pretty too,” he murmured to himself, earning him a swift blow to the head from Setora. Kuzaku nearly let out an involuntary “Ow!” but was able to cover his mouth in time to hold it in.

I know. I know, okay? Kuzaku signed at her.

Kuzaku and Setora weren’t alone here on the southern shore. She was telling him, *Stop prattling and be quiet.*

Still, there was no need to be quite so wary, was there? Kuzaku and Setora were right on the shore. A sandy beach, mere meters from the water line. If they looked to the left, there was a Southern Expedition camp. The expedition forces, made up of orcs, undead, and gray elves, had slowly made their way here from the Kurogane Mountain Range and finally settled down to make camp near a fishing village on the shore of Lake Gandah.

That said, they hadn’t put up fences or watchtowers. There were watch fires dotted about and scouts standing or walking around carrying torches, but it didn’t feel like they were on high alert. If anything, it was the opposite. The night was half over at this point. Most of the soldiers had probably been snoring

for a while now.

When the morning came, the forces of the Southern Expedition would proceed a handful of kilometers to the west and cross the bridge over the Ruko River which flowed into Lake Gandah. Setora had said they'd be "a stone's throw" from Grozdendahl at that point, which apparently meant they'd be really close to it.

No, not tomorrow. It was past midnight, so today. The Southern Expedition would enter Grozdendahl today. A lot had happened. They'd driven the elves out of the Shadow Forest, taken Alterna, and killed the dwarven king and her attendants, so the soldiers must have been in a celebratory mood.



Yes, a *lot* had happened, so this wasn't actually the main force. It was a detachment. The main force, including Jumbo, had stayed behind in the Kurogane Mountain Range, while an orc named Maga Odoha had led this detached force here.

Unlike the rank and file soldiers, an officer like, say, Maga Odoha probably had mixed feelings about the situation. At the very least, he wouldn't be thinking, *Yeah, we won a whole bunch, now it's time to go home for some rest and relaxation.*

"Because a *lot* happened..." Kuzaku mumbled to himself again without meaning to.

Obviously, Setora whacked him again.

Sorry, sorry. Kuzaku waved his hands apologetically. Setora looked fed up with him. That part of her hadn't changed.

Kuzaku felt he hadn't changed much either. Obviously, he couldn't say he hadn't changed *at all*.

To give one example, though it was currently pitch black where they were standing on the shores of Lake Gandah, Kuzaku could see Setora's face clearly. It was likely the same for her.

His body felt awfully light too. In order to be less conspicuous, he wasn't wearing armor at the moment, instead opting for a blackish outfit. But that wasn't the reason behind the change. Even when he was buck naked, he felt different from before. Strangely energetic.

He had memories. He hadn't forgotten what had happened before this. He remembered Haruhiro, Ranta, and Yume.

Setora and Kuzaku had died after escaping the Ironblood Kingdom in the Kurogane Mountain Range. That part was kinda blurry, to be honest. He'd probably thought, *Oh, shit. I'm gonna die*, and then that's exactly what had happened to him.

After he had come back to life, apparently he had been a total mess in both mind and body. Things slowly came back together, and at some point he found

himself thinking, *Oh, I just have to listen to Merry-san.* Well, it had looked like Merry, but it wasn't. Kuzaku knew that too, but he had still decided, *I'm gonna do what Merry-san tells me for now.* He could tell that would be the best path to take. The right path to take.

He was still the same in many ways, but Kuzaku sensed that he must have been a different person from before. That wasn't bad. He didn't mind being who he was now. Did he like it? Well, he would say he was having a decent amount of fun. He enjoyed his current self.

Setora gave him a light shove from behind. That meant, *Time to get going.* Kuzaku nodded in response.

They brought their scarves up to just below their eyes and pulled their hoods down in front to cover their foreheads. It was effectively the same as wearing masks. Their skin was barely exposed. They were dressed in suitably dark clothing too.

Setora led the way, and Kuzaku followed.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to him: *Did I always walk this fast?*

He remembered being clumsier and feeling frustrated about the way that nothing he tried to do went smoothly. He'd think that he wanted to do this or that, and he wanted to do it a specific way, but it never went as he'd envisioned. It must've been because of how big he was. That's what Kuzaku had always thought.

He was too tall. His legs, too long. His trunk too. There was too much of him. Did he not have enough muscle? He'd tried training, but the added weight from his increased muscle mass had caused other problems. He had never been able to find a good balance, and hadn't known enough to figure out how best to strengthen himself. It wasn't something he could go to the others for advice about either, because it was an issue with his own body. Ultimately, Kuzaku had had to figure it out on his own. Whenever he wasn't hyper-focused, he had often found himself thinking things like, *Man, I'm slow,* and *Why do I have to be so ungainly?* and *If I'm this big, how do I still not have enough power?* He just hadn't been able to avoid taking notice of his weaknesses.

Still, the old Kuzaku hadn't taken his many shortcomings too seriously. He felt

like he hadn't been particularly harsh on others, and he had definitely been soft on himself. He'd liked it when people went easy on him, so he treated others the way he'd hoped to be treated.

Man, I was kind of a shit, huh? That was how Kuzaku felt about it now. *Not that there's a problem with having a guy like that around.* It was as if he were thinking about a different person.

Setora and Kuzaku were steadily approaching the Southern Expedition's camp site.

There were sentries scattered around the edges of the camp, as you would expect. Setora boldly and indifferently walked between two of them. Kuzaku followed her. The orcs were sleeping out in the open. Some had thick cloths or furs laid out beneath them, while others slept directly on the ground. There were hundreds of orcs roughing it like that, all around a collection of tents more or less in the center of the camp. The commanders would be sleeping in the tents, no doubt. Perk of the position. There were guards carrying torches standing near the tents. Watch fires too. Occasionally, an orc would lumber to his feet and wander off somewhere. Probably to take a piss.

No one took notice of Setora and Kuzaku. Even those who did see them never thought they might be intruders.

There was an impressive circular tent in the middle of the camp, large enough to house a family or two. Apparently, orcs mostly lived out in the wastelands in tents like this. Would that make this tent effectively the house of a clan leader?

The big tent had five or six smaller tents around it. It was pretty bright in that area, and there were a lot of guards, of course. The orcs raised massive boars, which they used as mounts, and Kuzaku could spot a number of them tied up here and there.

Maga Odoha, the leader of the Southern Expedition's detached force, was likely inside that big tent.

Kuzaku and Setora had been defending the former Ironblood Kingdom up until the No-Life King had dispatched them here to Grozdendahl three days ago.

At first, the king had only had the two of them, but fortunately, the area

around the former Ironblood Kingdom had an abundance of elf, dwarf, and orc corpses. Now that he was fully awakened, he was able to use his powers—which were so incredible you could only laugh—to resurrect those bodies. Basically, the king had created new undead subjects. The broken undead that had stopped moving could also be recycled as spare parts for the new undead.

Importantly, the undead were strong against the sekaishu. In fact, the king had initially come up with the undead as one of his countermeasures against it. If he put a wall of undead in the sekaishu's way, it wouldn't have an easy time getting close to him.

Still, there were other enemies aside from the sekaishu, and the main force of the Southern Expedition had been trying a variety of tactics to get inside the former Ironblood Kingdom. At the king's request, Kuzaku and Setora had mainly focused on them.

They killed when they had to, but also took a number of captives for the king to interrogate. The king was fluent in the human, orc, and—obviously—undead languages.

Using the information he'd learned from the prisoners, the king had come up with a plan and asked Kuzaku and Setora to carry it out. He could have ordered them to do it and they wouldn't have refused, but the fact that he still always asked them was so typical of the king. He didn't even like being called a king, apparently. It'd be nice to come up with something else to call him soon.

Maga Odoha was the head of the influential Odoha clan and hadn't always been on such great terms with Great King Dif Gogun.

Dif Gogun and Maga Odoha were both clan leaders, and the Gogun clan hadn't been greatly superior to the Odoha clan. The two had been on about the same level. Rivals, basically. From Maga Odoha's perspective, there was no real reason he should have to obey Dif Gogun, his equal.

That was why, early on, he'd taken a combative posture, like, *You wanna go, punk?* He'd started fights that he lost, been bullied, had his followers poached, lost his temper, and gone to raid Dif Gogun's place only to get ambushed, and eventually, with no choice left, finally bent the knee.

Still, Maga Odoha had shown his determination, like, *I'll submit, but you'd*

better give the Odoha clan preferential treatment. If you don't, we'll fight until you kill every last one of us. I'll kill you and die myself.

Dif Gogun had been impressed, like, *That's some tough talk. I can see you really mean it. You're so manly,* and happily accepted it.

Maga Odoha was a brave warrior who wielded a great naginata and dyed all of his hair green and yellow in the tradition of the Odoha clan. But he was more of a thinker than a fighter, and widely seen as a clever individual. He was knowledgeable, could read and write, and was said to be well-versed in the study of languages, though not on the same level as Kuzaku's king. He could speak languages other than Orcish, and was relatively close to Jumbo of Forgan. These days, he was also a good friend of Great King Dif Gogun and could appeal to him directly.

Setora slipped between two of the tents surrounding Maga Odoha's. Kuzaku followed her. There was a sentry not five meters away, so he was amazed they weren't spotted. The old Kuzaku would have been sweating buckets. Mind you, the current one wasn't exactly thinking, *It'll be fine, we can definitely pull it off,* either. He was concerned. *I dunno. Won't he spot us?* Well, maybe not concerned. He had almost no sense of fear. No, not almost, he had none whatsoever. If things got hairy, so be it. He looked forward to seeing what would happen then, including what might happen to him.

He had a lot to look forward to.

Like meeting Haruhiro, for one thing.

How would Haruhiro react when they met again? Would he cry when he saw what Kuzaku had become? Or would he laugh? He might be afraid and confused.

How would Kuzaku feel, killing Haruhiro with his own hands?

The old Kuzaku had liked Haruhiro. And not just a little. He'd loved and respected everything about the man. He'd adored him.

What about now?

He didn't think he hated him. Surely the current Kuzaku liked Haruhiro too.

But if it were a question of if he could kill him or not, he probably could.

No matter what happened, the old Kuzaku could never have done that. He'd have offed himself instead.

Now, he was simply intrigued by the prospect.

How exactly had Kuzaku changed? If he met Haruhiro, he'd be able to figure that out, to a degree. If he killed Haruhiro, even more so. Even if he didn't up and kill the thief right away, what would Kuzaku feel, holding a half-dead Haruhiro by the throat, able to end the other's life at any moment? What would he say? What would Haruhiro do? If he could, he wanted to find out.

Setora didn't stop after slipping between the tents. It was a straight shot to Maga Odoha's from here. The entrance to the big tent was in the front. This was the back. There were guards nearby. Armed orcs, not even three meters away. The hair spilling out from under their helmets was green and yellow. They were from the Odoha clan, then. The sentries hadn't noticed Setora and Kuzaku yet, but it was only a matter of time until they did. The two intruders were just walking past them toward the tent, so there was no way they wouldn't notice.

Setora drew her sword and thrust it into the big tent.

No doubt hearing the noise, the sentries turned in their direction.

Unconcerned, Setora continued making a vertical tear through both the thick fabric of the tent and its frame.

The orcs were shouting something in their language, but by that point, Setora and Kuzaku were both stepping through the hole she'd made in the tent. She'd done considerable damage to the frame, but it wasn't going to collapse that easily. This big tent was sturdy. There was a furnace with a chimney in the middle, a low bed, a table, a chest, chairs, shelves, and barrels. The orc lying in the bed jumped to his feet. He was the only one in there.

"Kuzaku."

Kuzaku moved before Setora could give him the order. He knew he was a bit slow in the head. Still, he wasn't such a total moron that he'd forget what he needed to be doing at a time like this.

The orc was taller than Kuzaku, who was 190 centimeters, and his width was even more impressive than his height. His long and wild hair was dyed green and yellow, and he wore a kimono-like outfit tied at the front with a belt. Was that what he always wore to bed?

The orc pulled a dagger from his pocket and tried to unsheathe it. Kuzaku moved faster, karate chopping the orc's left wrist. He dropped the dagger with a grunt of pain.

Sorry, Kuzaku thought as he buried his left fist in the orc's solar plexus. Almost simultaneously, his right fist collided with the orc's jaw. Yeah, Kuzaku's body was definitely moving better than it had before. He didn't tire either. He was in top condition. Having his body do exactly what he told it to felt really good.

"Nwagwah!"

The orc tried to grab Kuzaku. It was impressive that he'd chosen fight over flight. But it hadn't been because of a clear-headed decision on the orc's part. It was instinct, or desperation. Kuzaku easily evaded the orc's grasp and got around behind him, then pinned the orc's arms behind his back and sat down on the bed. The orc tried to resist, of course. Kuzaku understood why, but it would do the orc no good.

"General Maga Odoha." Setora leveled her sword at the orc's throat. "We are emissaries of the No-Life King."

"Ngh!"

The moment he heard that name, Maga Odoha ceased struggling. He seemed pretty surprised—for now, at least.

Orcish soldiers rushed into the tent, shouting something. Setora didn't even glance at the entrance. Her eyes were focused solely on Maga Odoha. The tip of her sword, which could have ended his life at any moment, didn't waver in the slightest.

"Have them stand down. We simply want to talk."

"Wagah guddoah..." Maga said gutturally, giving an order to the soldiers. One of them tried to argue, but Maga Odoha repeated his command in a harsher tone. The soldiers left the tent without turning their backs to Kuzaku and

Setora. There were still a number of them peering in through the hole Setora had opened, but they didn't look like they were about to charge in.

"Noddorago... The No-Life King...?" Maga Odoha spoke with a low rumble in his throat. "You people are...human. You say you're humans...serving the No-Life King?"

"Exactly," Setora replied, her sword still not moving in the slightest.

Hm, what about Setora-san? Kuzaku wondered.

The old Setora and the new one. What about her had changed and what hadn't? Kuzaku had pestered her about it repeatedly, but she wouldn't give him a proper answer. He thought she was quieter compared to before, at least. She'd always had an incredibly subdued personality, but now she showed even less emotion.

"We died once. The No-Life King shared a part of himself with us and turned us into something not human."

"Not...human?"

"Long ago, there were the five children, or the five princes. Do you know of them?"

"I do... Even now, King Ishi, Deres Pain, Architekra, and Gyabigo...still live."

"You may think of us as the same as them. New princes, essentially."

Setora sounded so serious when she said that, Kuzaku couldn't help but crack a smile.

"I dunno, it's not really my style, and you strike me as more of a princess than a prince, Setora-san."

"Don't speak more than necessary," she said without glaring at him. That made him kinda sad. If she was going to chastise him, he'd prefer it if she'd give him a real look of scorn and punch and kick him and stuff.

I think I might be a masochist, Kuzaku began to suspect. It wasn't that he wanted just anyone to treat him that way. He just happened to really like it when Setora was mean to him.

“Princes of the No-Life King...” Maga snorted, shaking his head a little. “You expect me...to believe that?”

“No.”

Setora suddenly withdrew her sword. And furthermore, she let go of it. It fell to the carpet with a dull thud.

“I hope you’ll believe us, but I won’t force you to. I think I’ve already told you. We simply want to talk. Kuzaku.”

“Roger.”

Kuzaku let go of Maga Odoha and moved away from the bed to stand next to Setora. Setora was the first to bow her head and take a knee. Kuzaku followed her example.

“I apologize for our rudeness, General Maga Odoha,” Setora said, her head still lowered. “However, I doubt we would have been able to approach you had we not resorted to these measures. We do not seek to fight. Nor to kill even a single one of your soldiers. That is why we chose to do things this way. Please understand that.”

Kuzaku could have picked up Setora’s sword and gone on the attack at any moment. It probably wouldn’t have been impossible for them to cut their way out of the camp through the orcish soldiers. He wouldn’t know until he tried, but he figured the two of them could pull it off with the strength they had now. But only as a last resort.

“You don’t...seek to fight?” Maga Odoha was still sitting on the bed. He could have gone for the dagger Kuzaku had knocked out of his hands, or the great naginata that was standing near the bed, but he wasn’t doing that. “You want to talk. That’s what you’re trying to tell me?”

“Precisely.” Setora still had not raised her face. Her eyes were looking straight down. “The king seeks dialogue. He wishes to be friends with you. That is his true desire, the same as it was during the era of the Alliance of Kings.”

“Friends...”

“I should add, the king did not order us to do this. He asked. He was hoping

that we would come on his behalf and communicate his intentions to you.”

As he listened to Setora speak, Kuzaku was reminded of the No-Life King’s voice and face. If the king hadn’t looked like who he appeared to be, would they have done it? Maybe they wouldn’t have responded to *“Could you run a little errand for me? Please? I’m counting on you,”* with an instant *“You betcha.”* Or maybe it didn’t matter who the king looked like. If he thought about it, they owed the king their lives. The king had made the new Kuzaku and Setora from the old. In a way, he’d given birth to them.

Could Kuzaku and Setora defy the king? It was possible that they couldn’t refuse him. There might have been some kind of compulsion that would stop them from doing so, even if his requests were unreasonable. Kuzaku couldn’t be sure, even if he did feel like he had the ability to say, *Yeah, I dunno about that. I’d rather not.*

But with that face? And that voice too? There was honestly a part of him that thought, *That’s Merry-san.*

Kuzaku understood. The king was like Merry, but he wasn’t her. It wasn’t even clear if Merry still existed inside him. It could be that she was just a wrapper at this point.

Still, he couldn’t help thinking, *But that’s Merry.*

Though he had no memory of it, he suspected that Kuzaku might have been in love with Merry. But Haruhiro loved Merry, and Merry had loved him back. They were both so innocent and shy that he couldn’t be sure exactly how far things had gone. However, he was certain their love had been mutual.

Kuzaku had probably felt affection for Merry. He’d fallen in love with her.

Knowing his personality, he must have worn his heart on his sleeve. He couldn’t imagine that he hadn’t told her how he felt. And she’d shot him down. Had his heart been seriously broken, or had she let him down gently? Either way, Haruhiro had gotten close to Merry after that. Come to think of it, Haruhiro had known Merry longer, so maybe the thief had loved her all along.

But, well, this was Haruhiro. He knew how Haruhiro was. Knowing him, he had probably dragged his feet about it forever. Yet despite that, after

everything that had happened, the two of them had finally gotten together. Really, though, how far *had* the two of them gone? Kuzaku was extremely curious, but there was no way to know. There had been a lot of positive energy going back and forth between them, however. And then *that* had to go and happen.

The old Kuzaku would have felt pretty beat up over it, but the current one wanted to get up and dance.

Aw, man. I feel bad for you, Haruhiro. Like, what the hell? How is that fair? How does that even happen? I mean, seriously. I feel ridiculously bad for you. You must've been shocked silly, Haruhiro.

Would Haruhiro be able to recover from what he'd been through? Assuming he wasn't dead, of course. But Kuzaku figured he had survived somehow. He was a stubborn one, that Haruhiro. Oh, and awfully lucky too. Haruhiro might not have thought so, but the facts spoke for themselves. Haruhiro had managed to walk away from situations that should have killed him more times than Kuzaku cared to count. If not for some pretty crazy good fortune, he would have died by now. Like Kuzaku had. It was a matter of luck, and Haruhiro's was good. It'd take an awful lot to kill him.

That's why he was sure Haruhiro was all right.

He was out there somewhere. Alive.

It seemed the No-Life King wanted to talk to Maga Odoha, and by extension, the great king of the orcs, Dif Gogun. But the one Kuzaku wanted to talk to was definitely Haruhiro.

Haruhiro, man, I'm with Merry-san. Well, I'm not with her right this second, but I'm working with her. She might have changed on the inside, but it's still Merry-san, right? Part of her is in me now. I can tell. Merry and I are different, but we're connected somehow.

You know I loved Merry, right? I dunno if she rejected me or what, but in the end, she got together with you, yeah? Well, it wasn't actually "the end," was it? There was more after that. Now I'm with Merry-san, and you aren't. And the way I see it, I'm probably with Merry-san forever now.

I'd like you to know that I didn't want it to be this way. Okay? This is just how it all worked out. And I'm thinking things aren't so bad like this. Setora-san's with us too. I'm not lonely. I'm the opposite of that, I guess. And I don't feel uneasy. I'm probably kidding myself, but I feel like there's nothing I can't do.

If Kuzaku told Haruhiro all that, what would his reaction be? Would he cry? He'd start bawling, wouldn't he? *I'd love to see that*, thought Kuzaku. He wanted to watch as Haruhiro wept like a child. What would he feel then? The idea fascinated him.

Setora was negotiating with Maga Odoha to have him act as their intermediary and arrange a meeting with Great King Dif Gogun. That was the king's desire, but Kuzaku's was to see Haruhiro. He'd get his chance eventually. The anticipation was killing him.

"Hey." Setora elbowed Kuzaku in the ribs.

"Huh...? What? What's up?"

"Were you not listening?" Setora sent Kuzaku a look that could kill.

Ooh, scary. Kuzaku chuckled and gave her a goofy grin. "Uh, yeah? I was listening. Kinda. Sorta. Huh? You're all finished now?"

"In light of the situation between our groups, we will initially be taken to Grozdendahl as detainees. After that, General Maga Odoha will arrange an audience with Great King Dif Gogun for us."

"Detainees?"

"Prisoners."

"Whaaa? We're letting them catch us? Is that really a good idea?"

"Consider how this looks for the general. He cannot be expected to treat us as honored guests after we suddenly invaded his camp."

"We held off on killing anyone to show we weren't enemies, though. This sure seems like a lot of work just to talk to one guy. Well, whatever."

Kuzaku rose before she could say anything more and began disarming himself of every weapon he'd been carrying. He asked Maga Odoha if he should get naked, just so the orc could be sure he was now completely unarmed, but he

was told that wouldn't be necessary, so he left his clothes on and put his hands up.

"All right. Now tie me up or whatever it is you're gonna do."

"Can't you take this a little more seriously?" Setora complained. She had disarmed herself like Kuzaku. Maga Odoha seemed taken aback by this turn of events, which was kind of funny.

And that was how Kuzaku and Setora ended up bound and captured. That said, though their arms were behind their backs in manacles, they weren't tied to a stake or chunked in a cage or anything like that. There was still some time left before dawn, but Maga Odoha ordered that his forces be roused, and had them prepare to set out. The detached force of the Southern Expedition departed before sunrise.

On the march, Kuzaku and Setora walked surrounded by many orc soldiers. The soldiers, unlike the general, smelled like wild beasts, making it hard to bear the stench of them, but considering they were returning from a campaign, that was probably to be expected. The two of them got used to the smell eventually.

They crossed the Ruko river around the time the sun began to rise. The bridge, lined with stone arches, looked both sturdy and cool.

Kuzaku had already seen Grozdendahl from across Lake Gandah. He'd been thinking, *Hey, the Swan Palace looks pretty cool. Guess it'll have a sizable town, huh?* But that didn't even come close to the reality of the place. It wasn't just "sizable." The number of buildings was ridiculous. Orcs were big. They couldn't live in tiny houses, so their buildings generally had to be big too.

The farmland spreading out around the city area of Grozdendahl was also a sight to behold. The fields, neatly separated by paths and windbreaks, were abundant with green produce, and scattered around them were windmills and clusters of huts and warehouses. It seemed to stretch on forever. There was so much civilization here, it was crazy. Sure, there had been fields and pastures around Alterna, but not on this scale. The gap was insurmountable. Like the difference between heaven and earth.

The road from the bridge to Grozdendahl was paved with stone. It was easily fifteen meters across, making it easy for Maga Odoha's detachment of the

Southern Expedition to march along it. It didn't feel cramped at all.

The Southern Expedition's detached force had to stop in front of Grozdendahl and divert into the side roads that spread out around the grassy fields, where they would stand by. Even while they waited, they could kill time looking at the city.

Eventually, what appeared to be orcish civilians, young and old, pressed toward them, cheering, clapping, whistling, and offering the soldiers of the detached force flowers and drinks that were likely alcoholic.

All of this celebration was solely for the return of the soldiers, obviously, so Setora was completely expressionless, not reacting to it in the slightest. Kuzaku, on the other hand, was pumped up. Sure, it had nothing to do with him. But who was going to complain if he got excited and made some noise too?

Setora, certainly.

Yeah, I bet she will. She'll totally be pissed. Well, whatever. Let her be mad.

"Yayyyyyyy! Yahoooo...!" Kuzaku let out a celebratory cheer and, as expected, Setora stomped down on his foot with all of her might, making him scream out in pain.

"You're gonna break something, Setora-san... My bones are just about pulverized. It hurts when you do that, okay?"

"You'll get better."

"Well, yeah."

After some time, Kuzaku and Setora were separated from the soldiers and brought into Grozdendahl under guard. For various reasons, they were loaded onto a carriage to be brought in. Although, considering carriages were supposed to be drawn by horses, not giant boars, was it still correct to call it that? Two orcs rode with Kuzaku and Setora inside the carriage-that-might-not-actually-be-a-carriage with its windows shut tight. To keep an eye on them, presumably.

"Hey, hey, Setora-san. D'you know what they call those big, boar-like creatures?"

“I haven’t the foggiest.”

“Well, ask. Get the orcs guarding us to tell you.”

“I don’t speak Orcish any more than you do. If you really need to know, you’ll have to ask yourself.”

“Screw that. Too much effort.”

“Somehow, you’ve become even more insufferable...”

“Oh, yeah? Really? I’m pretty sure I was always like this. You, though? You’re definitely putting more effort into playing hard to get than you used to. Let’s make nice. I mean, we’re comrades and all, right? And we’re in the same boat here, aren’t we? Oh, hey! I’ve got an idea. How about we make a baby together sometime?”

“Come again...?”

“Yeah, a baby. You and me. What do you say? I wouldn’t mind doing it more than once. Do you think we *can* make babies? If we are able to, I wonder how they’d turn out. Aren’t you interested?”

“You’re asking out of *curiosity*?”

“Naw. If you’re the mother, I think I could really get into baby-making. Listen, I know it’s awkward if I just come out and say I wanna do it with you. But I’m not just making a dirty joke here, okay? I’m serious. I like the way you look, and your personality’s kinda cute, in a way.”

“What do you mean, ‘in a way’?”

“Y’know, I’m not really sure.”

“You’re the one who said it.”

“Well, what it comes down to is...I like you. I dunno if I *love* you; that’s a bit more iffy, but like you? Yeah, I like you, Setora-san.”

Setora let out an exaggerated sigh but gave no further response.

The carriage-that-might-not-actually-be-a-carriage continued to rattle along for an awfully long time. The two orcs didn’t say a word the entire ride. They just silently watched Kuzaku and Setora. These orcs, by the way, had their hair

died red and blue. Kuzaku tried to chat them up, saying their hair looked awesome, among other things, but they simply ignored him. They were frighteningly stoic. Big too, with orange clothing and silver armor, carrying what looked to be high-quality hand axes and longswords. They might have been elites, not just run-of-the-mill guards.

When they were let out of the carriage-that-might-not-actually-be-a-carriage, they were right in front of the Swan Palace. From this perspective, it looked like a great white bird, ready to take off into the cerulean sky.

On either side of the stone steps leading up to the Swan Palace—which seemed to be completely white—stood lines of orc soldiers in orange clothes and silver armor, carrying not just hand axes and longswords, but also spears and shields on top of that. The hair spilling out from under their helms was also red and blue. They probably belonged to the same clan.

How were the two of them supposed to act here? Kuzaku had no clue, so he'd have to do what Setora said. With orcs in front of and behind them, they climbed the stone steps and passed through a grandiose gate at the top—ten meters wide, fifteen tall, and decorated with patterns in gold and ivory. Beyond it lay the inside of the Swan Palace.

The ceiling here was really high. It was an incredibly big, open space, and the hallways stretched out for who knew how far in all directions, to the point that it was hard to take it all in at once. The only windows were high up, and the light that shone in through them reflected off a floor that had been polished until it shined. Some orcs were armed, while others were in civilian clothes, or wearing gaudy kimono-like outfits instead of armor, and carrying no weapons. It was all orcs, no sign of the other races in sight. Just orcs everywhere.

Maybe it was because Kuzaku was human—or perhaps an ex-human at this point—but it caught him by surprise. These orcs, standing tall in their kimonos, their hair dyed in pretty colors and tied back or braided, struck him as pretty stylish.

It wasn't just men in the castle. There were women too. The women were heavy-set by human standards, but their long necks and small heads made their figures look quite attractive.

Their green skin came across as kind of reptilian, which was always going to seem strange to him, but it matched the vibrant colors they seemed so fond of.

It turned out that the orcs were a more fashion-conscious race than Kuzaku had ever given them credit for. Thanks to that, Kuzaku wasn't bored for one moment of their long, long walk through the castle. Instead of getting sick of the hike, he found that it actually put him in a good mood. Could he get away with stopping one of the orc ladies as she went by and being all like, *Hey, what do you say, how about a dance?* Yeah, no. That wasn't gonna fly. He was a prisoner and all. Was he, though? This didn't feel like how you treated prisoners. Maybe he *could* hit on them? Yeah, why not? Should he?

After a long internal battle, Kuzaku suppressed the impulse.

Wow. That was admirable of me. I wanna praise myself for it.

After walking around a lot, Kuzaku and Setora were led to a room. It wasn't that big of a room. If you considered the scale of the Swan Palace, it was actually pretty tiny. The ceiling was low too. Only comparatively, though—it was still four meters up—but the ceilings in the hallways had been so high it felt a bit cramped in here by comparison. There was a deep-pile rug on the floor, and orcs in kimonos of silk or something equally fancy were sitting on it. None of them used chairs, instead sitting cross-legged on zabuton cushions. There were seven of them, and they seemed like members of the upper class. Kuzaku didn't know how to tell an orc's age, but he didn't get the sense that any of them were young.

The elite soldiers who had brought Kuzaku and Setora this far unshackled them and left the room.

They stood there for some time, Kuzaku not knowing what to do, and Setora taking in the scene with an air of composure.

"Be seated," a bony orc who must have been considerably advanced in age instructed them in the human language.

There were a large number of cushions piled up in the corner of the room. Setora went and took two, handing one to Kuzaku.

"Where do you think we should sit?" Kuzaku asked her, but it was the elderly

orc who motioned with one hand to indicate they should sit to the left of him.

“Here.”

The seven orcs were seated roughly in a circle. It wasn't perfectly round, though, and not especially tight. There was plenty of space in between them. Setora sat to the left of the old orc, so Kuzaku plopped his cushion down to the orc's right and sat there.

“You...” Setora furrowed her brow.

The orcs seemed a little taken aback. Was the old orc confused? He looked back and forth from Setora to Kuzaku repeatedly.

“Huh? Here's no good? I dunno. I was just thinking if I sat beside Setora-san, it'd be kind of a tight fit, maybe? It'd throw off the symmetry too...”

Someone gracefully entered the room as Kuzaku trailed off. An orc, of course. Wearing an orange robe, a black jacket, and a tricolor overcoat of red, white, and blue. It was a rather showy ensemble, but not tastelessly so. His red and blue hair was neatly set, with not one hair out of place, and the tusks peeking out of the corners of his mouth were a glossy white. He was an impressive specimen of manhood. Beautiful, even. The golden crown on his head was elegant and suited him incredibly well.

“Is that the great king, maybe?”

It was hard to imagine he hadn't heard Kuzaku's whisper. But the orc, presumably Dif Gogun, didn't so much as glance at the ex-human, instead picking up a cushion with both hands and setting it down roughly across from the elderly orc. There was a shiny sword hanging at the great king's waist. He removed it from his sword belt, laid it on the floor, and sat down, all in one elegant, refined series of motions.

This was unexpected. The guy was the great king of the orcs, so Kuzaku had assumed he would be more rugged, with the toughest face any of them had ever seen, looking absolutely vicious, but also crafty and devious at the same time. The guy was an orc, after all. Prejudice was a terrifying thing. It looked like Kuzaku had let his biases get the better of him.

“You are in the presence of Great King Dif Gogun,” the elderly orc said,

placing his hands on his knees and bowing his head. The other orcs did likewise. Kuzaku rushed to imitate them, but Setora remained unmoving, her eyes fixed on the great king. Was that okay? Not paying their respects to him? Well, if Setora wanted to play it that way, he guessed he was fine with it.

The great king said something. In orcish, presumably. The elderly orc raised his head.

“The great king has said that there is no need to stand on ceremony in this room, the tonak. So long as we all act with respect, there will be no need for excessive displays of courtesy.”

“Man, you’re pretty damn fluent, huh? I’d bet you even know bigger words than I do,” Kuzaku said without meaning to, earning him a slight laugh from the great king. More of a snort, really. But he was laughing at what Kuzaku had said, right? The great king must have been able to understand the human language too. Probably a good thing to keep in mind.

That said, talking to the great king with the elderly orc as their interpreter was Setora’s job. Kuzaku would have liked to have said he was there as her bodyguard, but, frankly, she wasn’t in need of protection. If he was like, “I will protect you with every fiber of my being!” Setora would have snorted at him derisively. That, or she would have just ignored him entirely. He was more of an attendant, at best. Uh, not that he was doing anything to look after her. He was just there. Along for the ride. If Setora told him to do something, he had to do it. That made things easy.

Setora explained to Dif Gogun that their lord was the same No-Life King as the old one, that he had no intention of opposing the orcs, and that he was presently creating new undead, which he called rebirthians, in the former Ironblood Kingdom.

Yeah. That was it. Come to think of it, Kuzaku and Setora were also rebirthians, and the No-Life King was their creator and leader. Kuzaku didn’t mind the name. He actually quite liked it. Yes, Setora was the rebirthians’ emissary to Great King Dif Gogun, and Kuzaku was simply a tag-along.

When they explained that the rebirthians had a goal—the defeat of King Ishi and Archduke Deres Pain in Undead DC—Great King Dif Gogun’s expression

changed before the elderly orc had time to translate. Yeah, the great king definitely understood the human language.

The rebirthians wanted to eliminate King Ishi and Deres Pain in order to bring freedom to all the undead. And to that end, they wished to join hands with the orcs. Indeed, they wanted to build a cooperative relationship with the Great King of the Orcs, Dif Gogun, more than any other personage or group in the world. That was why the No-Life King sought a meeting with the great king.

The great king silenced the elderly orc, finally responding for himself. “I, too, would like to meet him. If your No-Life King is truly *the* No-Life King. But what proof is there of that?”

It was a deep voice that would seem to echo in your guts if you heard it, though his tone wasn’t threatening in any way. Still, it was super intimidating. “Full of majesty” might have been a good way to describe it.

“Humans. You say you were sent here as messengers of the No-Life King. How am I to believe that? We know the name of the No-Life King. We know his history. But none of us know the No-Life King himself.”

“Your concerns are reasonable.” Setora was completely calm. So calm, it scared Kuzaku a little. “My lord struggles with his inability to prove who he is. However, if you were to meet him in person, I am certain you would see for yourself that he is indeed the No-Life King.”

“Then he should have come himself, not sent mere envoys.”

“My king would have liked to.”

“You claim he cannot?”

“The sekaishu is after our lord.”

“Sekaishu...”

The great king looked around at the seven orcs. All but one of them shook their heads. The one who didn’t was sitting on his cushion, slack-jawed. Kuzaku didn’t speak their language, so he couldn’t tell what that orc said next, but the others all started talking to the orcs seated next to them, and the room quickly filled with noise.

The elderly orc asked Setora, “Does the sekaishu refer to the calamity brought about by the black ones? We’ve received reports of them from all sectors...”

She nodded. “That is precisely what the sekaishu is. It has crawled up from the bowels of the world, intent on devouring our king. The king’s old body should be hidden in Everest in Undead DC. Five hundred years ago, King Ishi and Deres Pain conspired to seal him away. Unbeknownst to them, however, a part of our king narrowly managed to escape, but it took many long years for him to be restored. The relic that he once carried on his person at all times in order to keep the sekaishu away is with his old body. Now he wishes to reclaim it.”

The information Setora presented them with must have come as a huge shock. Their faces changed color as they showered her with questions. The debate between them rapidly intensified too. The great king listened in silence, but he kept touching his cheeks and stroking his own hair—which was not how he’d act if he were calm about this revelation.

Kuzaku nearly yawned, but managed to hold it in. He wasn’t sleepy, but he’d gotten tired of being here. Why was Setora taking this envoy job so seriously? For Kuzaku’s part, he had only come along for the ride because Setora was going and he’d had nothing to do at the time. Maybe he should have tried thinking for himself more? It wasn’t his forte, but not having any desires of his own wasn’t good.

Something I want to do. What would that be? What do I want to do? If there’s one thing that comes to mind, it’s gotta be meeting Haruhiro again, I guess?

As Kuzaku was thinking, the conversation seemed to sort itself out.

Dif Gogun intended to meet with the No-Life King. However, they had no clear evidence that the person in question *was* the No-Life King, and he could not leave his domain in order to meet someone when he had no idea who they actually were. It might have been possible for him to invite the one they claimed was the No-Life King to Grozdendahl, but the conditions of such a meeting would need to be worked out. So it wasn’t an “*Okay, let’s meet,*” but more of a “*We will actively consider your proposal.*”

While there was no love lost between the orcs who followed the great king and the undead who followed King Ishi or Deres Pain, they were not openly

hostile. There were undead in the Southern Expedition, but they belonged to a faction that was separate from those of the two princes. The orcs *could* work with the No-Life King to defeat those two factions, in principle. Or at the very least, there was room for negotiation on that point.

For their part, the orcs sought information about other worlds. “We are prepared to offer that to you,” was Setora’s response. Kuzaku guessed that meant, *“If you make friends with us, we’ll tell you whatever we happen to know.”*

Setora asked the great king to have the Southern Expedition stop trying to invade the former Ironblood Kingdom and withdraw. In response to her request, the great king promised he would order an immediate halt to all offensive actions. Was stopping the attacks enough? Didn’t they need to drive the orcs off? Well, this was all part of a bargaining process, so maybe there needed to be some give and take.

Now, as for what they ultimately accomplished, you could say that they had laid the groundwork for a relationship that would allow them to talk things over and decide what was to be done later.

Setora and Kuzaku were going to return to the former Ironblood Kingdom and report on what had happened in their meeting with Great King Dif Gogun. This, despite the fact that the great king had invited them to dinner. Kuzaku had been pretty disappointed when Setora immediately declined the offer. They boarded the carriage-that-might-not-be-a-carriage and were delivered to the outskirts of Grozdendahl. This was also at Setora’s request. Kuzaku wanted to groan, *“We’re gonna make the trip on foot again?”* but he held back.

The sun was setting as they walked over the bridge that crossed the Ruko River. Looking out over the river and Lake Gandah behind it to the streets of Grozdendahl, illuminated by lamplight, it all made for an incredibly gorgeous scene. Kuzaku couldn’t restrain himself.

“Look at that, Setora-san! Damn, it’s beautiful! What a sight! Isn’t this the best?!”

“What drivel. Let’s get going.”

“Oh, come on. Can’t you have a little more, I dunno, chill? Take in the scenery

a bit...”

“I have plenty of ‘chill.’ The scenery simply doesn’t interest me.”

“Well, take an interest. Why don’t you try and enjoy life a little?”

“Life, huh?”

“Yeah! This is your second life, right? Although, between pre-Grimgar, post-Grimgar, and now, I might be on my third.”

“It’s not as if I haven’t been enjoying it.”

“Well, you don’t *look* like you’re enjoying it very much, do you? I guess that’s just how you are, though, huh, Setora-san?”

There was a group of people in dark red cloaks gathered together just across the bridge. Five, maybe six of them, loitering beside the road. They weren’t blocking anyone’s path, but they were the only people in the area who were just standing around other than the orcish soldiers, so there was clearly something weird about them.

“Hey, are those...” Kuzaku said to Setora.

She shook her head slightly. That probably meant “*Shut up.*”

The people in red cloaks wore their hoods low over their eyes. None of their skin was exposed, and their faces couldn’t be made out. Were they orcs? No, they were too skinny for that. Undead, maybe?

The two of them passed the group, and just a moment later, the group started to move, following them at a short distance.

About a kilometer from the bridge, their pursuers picked up speed.

The oversized katana Kuzaku had been using for a long time was slung over his back, but he also had a sword hanging at his waist that was more his size, which he’d found in the Ironblood Kingdom. A masterpiece of dwarven craftsmanship. That was the sword Kuzaku reached for.

“I can kill them, right?” Kuzaku asked quietly.

“Wait,” Setora answered as she slowed to a stop.

Kuzaku had been planning to draw his sword as he turned, but the people in

the dark red cloaks had pulled back their hoods and bowed their heads, so he thought better of it.

They definitely weren't orcs. But they weren't undead either. Their hair was pale, not bright, and they had somewhat ashen, bloodless skin. Their slender faces were perfectly proportioned, but inexpressive.

"Elves...?" Kuzaku murmured, his hand still on the hilt of his sword.

They had pointy ears.

"You're gray elves, then," Setora said.

One of the six, the leader of the group, nodded. "Indeed. My name is Melderheid. I have been participating in the Southern Expedition under orders from my lord, Zwarzfeld. It has come to my attention that you are envoys of the No-Life King."

"Ah, I see. One of the vice commanders of the Southern Expedition *was* a Sir Melderheid. The King of the Broken Valley's right-hand man, yes?"

"Huh. Sounds like he's a pretty big deal." Kuzaku looked around the area. "What's a big shot like you doing out here, lying in wait for us?"

"I wish to deliver a message."

It wasn't just Melderheid. All the gray elves showed so little emotion you would think they were plants or something. His lips barely moved when he spoke. It was impossible to tell what these guys were thinking.

"We, the gray elves of the Broken Valley, were loyal friends of the No-Life King. We have long wished for and looked forward to his return. If the No-Life King has come again, he should know that we did him no harm. It was all a plot by King Ishi and Deres Pain. Please tell the No-Life King that we, the elves of the Broken Valley, remain his friends now, as always."

"Can I take that as the will of King Zwarzfeld?" Setora asked, and Melderheid nodded without a moment's hesitation.

"If the No-Life King commanded it, I am certain my liege would cast aside the Broken Valley and rush to his side at once. If the No-Life King says to slay King Ishi and Deres Pain, we will bring all our forces to bear against them. The

princes are like the No-Life King's children. That is why we have chosen not to oppose them. We have no blades which we would turn on the children of our friends. However, if our friend says they are no children of his, we will show them no mercy."

"Got it. I will see to it that our king hears."

"Thank you."

"I may be visiting the Broken Valley in the not-so-distant future. Give my regards to King Zwarzfeld."

"I will do so."

Melderheid produced a transparent square token from his pocket. Was it glass? Or maybe something like crystal? It was rimmed with metal and had a crest-like design carved into it.

"Please, take this. It will serve as proof of your status, in the name of my liege."

"Thank you."

Once Setora had accepted the token, Melderheid bowed and stepped back, lowering his hood. The gray elves turned and left. With that, Kuzaku was finally able to take his hand off the hilt of his sword.

"Is this okay? The gray elves are supposed to be the orcs' allies, right? The great king's still acting like he hasn't made up his mind about what to do with us, but those gray elves were pretty welcoming, weren't they? If a big shot like him goes and makes contact with us here, aren't the orcs gonna find out about it?"

Setora snorted. "So, it turns out you actually are capable of thinking about the issues at hand, then."

"You're always so quick to make fun of me. Yeah, I'm not so good at using my head, but of course I think about things."

"Which is why I just said that you do, yes."

"Oh, okay. So, you were praising me, then, huh?"

“Not praising you. I was being sarcastic. In other words, I was belittling you.”

“See? You were making fun of me after all. That’s the problem with you, y’know? You’re always like this. Is it fun, treating me like I’m an idiot?”

“What reason would I have to do something that was boring?”

“Hm? What’s that mean?”

Setora started walking without giving him a response, making him hurry to catch up and walk beside her. At least it didn’t look like she was planning to ditch him.

What reason would she have to do something that was boring?

Given the way she’d said it, the answer must’ve been that there was no reason. If she didn’t want to do something, she’d say so. She never did anything she didn’t want to. That was how Setora had always been. No, maybe that wasn’t completely true. It was possible that her old self had made the effort to read the situation she was in and hold back when she needed to.

The two of them went off the road and followed the shore of Lake Gandah. The weather had been good last night, and tonight was no different, with no wind and only a few small waves. This segment of the shore had a lot of pebbles on the ground, which made a soothing sound as they walked across them.

“Hey, Setora-san. Y’know that thing I was talking about before?”

“Before? When?”

“About how we ought to enjoy our second or third lives. Are you enjoying yours?”

“I’m curious about the No-Life King. His history and his past. And the great king of the orcs is an interesting man too.”

“Whaaa? Is he the kind of guy you like?”

“Whether I like him or not is immaterial.”

“Huh. I dunno, / think it’s pretty important. But it’s your life, I guess.”

“To borrow your expression, I am enjoying my ‘second life’ in my own way.”

“Oh, yeah? Me too. Since I’ve gotta live it anyway, I wanna keep having more

and more fun. So, I've been thinking about what I want to do."

"You can do as you please."

"Uh, I agree we should both do what we want, but doesn't the conversation just end there, in that case? You can just brush off what I'm about to say, but hear me out, would you?"

"I'll listen, at least."

"What do you think about killing Haruhiro?"

Kuzaku started to laugh as soon as he said it. He covered his mouth with his hands, trying to suppress the laughter, but it kept spilling out, with Setora giving him the side-eye all the while. His diaphragm wouldn't stop trembling. He wanted to try saying it again. He wouldn't be able to calm down until he did.

"I was thinking I might kill Haruhiro."

"Why?" Setora asked, her tone flat.

Kuzaku kept laughing. He laughed so hard that he cried. *Oh, crap.*

Setora sighed. She was about to get fed up with him. Maybe she already was, but it wasn't like Kuzaku wanted to laugh. He just couldn't help himself.

"No, listen, okay? It's not like that. I don't hate the guy or anything. You know I always used to like Haruhiro, right? I mean, I still like him. He's number one on my list of people I want to meet."

"Do you want to meet him or kill him? Which is it?"

"Uh, both, I guess? When I think of the look on Haruhiro's face when we meet again, it gets me all excited. And so, I got to thinking, since I love him so much, what would it be like to kill him with my own two hands? I wanna get a taste of how that would make me feel. Like, emotionally, and stuff. I dunno. I feel like the moment I kill Haruhiro, I'll be like, 'Whoaaa.' More than for anyone else I might kill. I've already experienced death once myself, so I was thinking killing someone I love should be the next thing on the list."

"I see."

"You get it, Setora-san? The way I'm feeling?"

“I have no desire to kill anyone, personally, but I can understand where you’re coming from.”

“You can understand, huh? That’s so like you, Setora-san.”

“I can’t imagine that you understand me nearly well enough to be talking about what is or isn’t like me.”

“Yeah, guess not. Some things are just too complicated for me. You’re such an enigma that I could never figure you out, you know? But I’ve been thinking about all sorts of things that are more my speed. Like, it’s not just killing Haruhiro. I’ve even thought about what I’d do after that too.”

Setora stopped and looked at Kuzaku. She blinked. It seemed he had her attention now.

“What is it? Speak up,” she said.

“I was thinking, maybe we could ask the king.”

“Ask what?”

“If he could make Haruhiro like us?”

“Like...us?”

“Yeah. See, I don’t know what’s possible, so we’d have to check with the king first, but I was thinking, ‘What if we kill Haruhiro and make him like us?’”

Kuzaku clamped his hands down on Setora’s shoulders. She just stared back at him without so much as flinching.

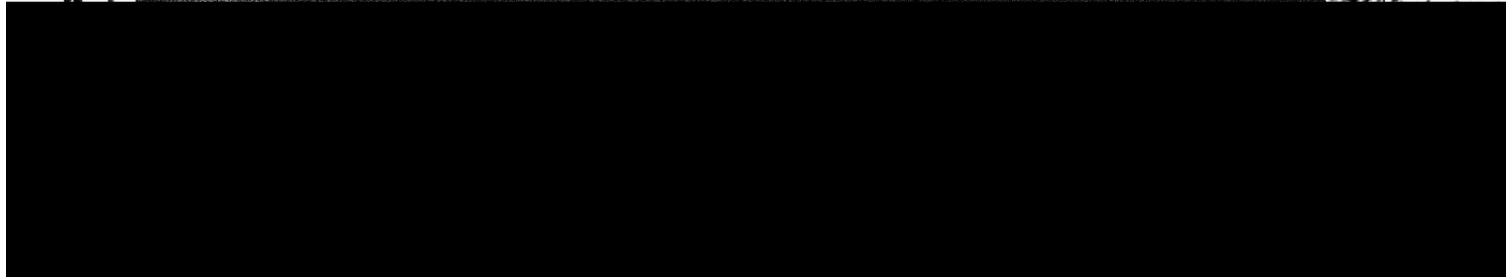
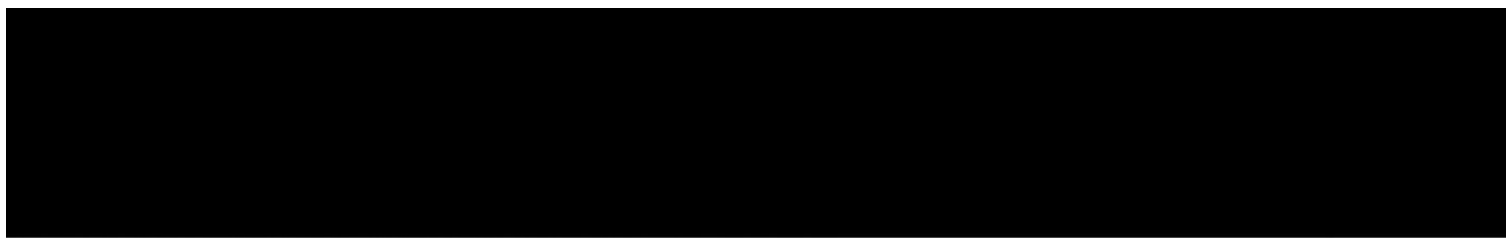
“So, what do you think, Setora-san? Wouldn’t that be something else, watching to see how Haruhiro turns out? I mean, he’d be Haruhiro no matter how it goes, and I could never hate Haruhiro. And knowing him, he probably won’t hold the whole killing-him thing against me. Even if he does, I think it’d be pretty interesting to see how that plays out too, y’know? Either way, I can only see it being super fun, so... Yeah...”

He was about to burst out laughing again. He needed to hold it in. If he started to laugh, he wouldn’t be able to speak coherently, and Setora was actually listening to him now.

“When I meet Haruhiro, I wanna kill him. It’s pretty much the only thing I think about. He’s probably still alive. I’ll be pretty bummed out if he’s dead, but my gut is telling me that he’s definitely okay, so I wanna kill him myself. Oh, sorry. I got a bit too worked up talking about it, huh? I just can’t help how passionate this makes me feel. Man, I wanna see Haruhiro. I do. I wanna kill him. I wanna kill Haruhiro. I want Haruhiro to be like us. So, what do you think?”

Setora’s eyes slowly narrowed.

“Sure. Why not?” Her lips parted slightly and the corners of her mouth turned up. “That sounds like it could be amusing.”



0122A660. Alive

Anywhere from a third to one-half of the walls that once surrounded Alterna had collapsed. There were places where they had simply fallen and others where they had been broken through, becoming paths for the sekaishu. It had gotten so bad that the north gate seemed to only be there to welcome the black monstrosities in rather than to keep them out.

The hill just southeast of Alterna had been turned into a part of the sekaishu along with the Forbidden Tower that stood atop it. Moreover, it was active enough that one could easily notice this fact, even from a distance. The sekaishu forms that morphed, the ones that roiled and formed waves, and the ones that clearly seemed to move with purpose were more dangerous than the ones that appeared to be lifeless. Haruhiro and the gang had decided against going near the hill.

On the northwest wall, there was a two-meter segment that had crumbled and fallen down, which was devoid of sekaishu, as far as they could tell. They entered Alterna there and found themselves on the border between the northern district and West Town.

The western part of the northern district had always had a lot of older wooden buildings, and West Town was densely packed with miserable hovels that bordered on ruins. Both areas were organized with a complicated mess of alleyways that were much too narrow to call streets, and visibility was poor. The group decided to head to the Temple of Lumiaris on the very northwest edge of the northern district. It was a stone building constructed on high ground and was the best vantage point in Alterna outside of Tenboro Tower.

Standing out in front of the temple, they could see the entire city, more or less.

Alterna had been completely infested by the sekaishu. Multiple black rivers now flowed through its streets. From the northern district into the southern district, across the plaza in front of Tenboro Tower and down Flower Street,

into Celestial Alley where Sherry's Tavern had once been, and around the area where the former Volunteer Soldier Corps office and the craftsmen's town were. It still wasn't as bad as they had imagined, though. Alterna was deserted. There wasn't so much as a bird in sight. The sekaishu that had plunged this town into terror and brought about its destruction were, at the very least, no longer active. It was quiet. Silently rotting. Eventually, it would all be weathered away, leaving no trace. It just hadn't happened yet. Alterna was a city of death.

They took a break in the nave on the third floor, where there was a giant statue of Lumiaris, the God of Light. The idol, which looked androgynous, was just under ten meters tall, so the chamber's ceiling was awfully high. Chairs and book rests were piled up haphazardly along the wall. Many of them were broken. The stone floor had many cracks and blackened spots too. It was more than enough room for the team. Too much room, actually. Hundreds could have slept on the floor here.

"Seems safe enough to light a fire, yeah?"

"Think so."

"We're not outta food yet, but we're gonna need to secure some soon. Well, I'm sure we'll be able to find something if we look around a bit."

Ranta and Yume had laid some furs out on the floor and were sitting on top of them. Ranta subtly rested his head on Yume's shoulder, and she didn't try to shrug him away.

Itsukushima and Poochie were staring up at the statue of Lumiaris.

Haruhiro was clenching and unclenching his fists. He didn't feel enough discomfort to say it hurt. They felt off, though. Hard to move. He was probably unconsciously limiting his motions.

His body was afraid. Of what? He didn't know.

"I'll go take a look," Haruhiro said.

"By yourself, Haru-kun?"

"I prefer it that way."

"Oh, okay..."

“I’m heading out.”

“Be careful, y’hear?” Yume looked concerned.

“And make sure you come back,” Ranta added brusquely.

Itsukushima and Poochie watched silently as Haruhiro departed.

Haruhiro left the temple and headed toward West Town. It was a shadowy place. Sunshine hardly ever reached the streets. The ground wasn’t just wet because of the rain and dew. It had been left constantly moist from all the human and bird excrement it had absorbed. There was no escaping the stench. He’d become inured to it with time, but visiting again now, after so long, he wanted to tear off his own nose. To think, Haruhiro had once been able to breathe normally in a place that reeked so badly. He sometimes spotted cockroaches squirming in the dark, but aside from that, there didn’t seem to be so much as a single mouse.

Continuing down a specific back alley, he came to a short iron door. The keyhole had a crest like the palm of a hand carved around it.

Haruhiro crouched down and pressed his right hand to the crest. He pushed until his wrist hurt. Doing this sent a signal to the inside. He waited, but there was no response.

Haruhiro sat down with his back to the door.

After some time, he stood up and pushed on the crest again.

He repeated this process four times. Still, nothing happened.

“Eliza-san!” Haruhiro called out a woman’s name. She had speaking tubes that would pick up any sound in this alley. Not that he thought it would help. And, as expected, he received no response. It looked like the thieves’ guild was deserted too.

Haruhiro left West Town and headed toward the southern district. There were a number of long, thin sekaishu intermingling as they crawled through the blind alleys of the craftsmen’s town. There used to be blacksmiths here who had done a lot of work for the volunteer soldiers. There’d been clothiers too. And masons and carpenters. But their workshops had all been completely

looted and destroyed, making it hard to reminisce about better times. There had been food stalls near the craftsmen's town too. Haruhiro and the party had been regular visitors. One place had served a noodle dish called soruzo. It had a salty broth with meat and yellow noodles. Moguzo had been a big fan. Now there was a dark, black sekaishu lying in the spot where the soruzo place had once been.

Haruhiro dropped by the volunteer soldiers' lodging house. The rooms had changed little, even after all this time, but that evoked strangely little emotion in him. He said Manato and Moguzo's names, but his heart didn't feel even a twinge of pain.

There had once been a wall clock in the entrance hall. Now there was nothing.

I used to check the time here, right? Haruhiro thought.

Back when he had lived in the lodging house, he had made use of the clock often.

"I wonder what's gotten into me."

Time. I need time. It was the same after what happened to Manato and Moguzo, right? I'll just have to suck it up for a while.

He'd had this thought before. Time. He needed time. The same thought, perhaps even the same words. Back then, he'd thought he couldn't endure the things that had happened, couldn't keep going anymore. That was why he'd wanted to end it.

But ending it myself is too much effort.

What was Haruhiro doing now? Going with the flow.

Things can only turn out however they're going to turn out. Let what's gonna happen happen.

Haruhiro left the lodging house. He still had time before sunset. Heading north, he found himself walking past the spot where the Yorozu Deposit Company had been, when he suddenly came to a stop.

"It's gone..."

Well, to be precise, there was still a pile of rubble. There was a warehouse in

there somewhere, solid as a rock. He recalled that Jin Mogis's men had been guarding the place. He didn't really know what had been inside. Probably the gold and valuables that the volunteer soldiers had deposited with the company.

The deposit company. Yorozu. Come to think of it, what had become of her? He felt like it had been a while since he'd thought about whether someone else was safe.

Why had Haruhiro come here, anyway? He'd checked on it some time before, at Shinohara's request. Maybe there was something about that request that was nagging at him.

"What's it matter?"

He didn't know. It just bothered him somehow.

"Why would it bother me...?"

His head felt incredibly heavy. This was too much trouble. He didn't want to think about anything. And he didn't have to. If he stayed indifferent to it all, his head wouldn't feel heavy, nor would his heart, and this lethargy afflicting his whole body would probably go away.

Haruhiro tried to look up to the sky. He couldn't bring himself to tilt his face upward, try as he might. He just turned his eyes instead. The sky was low.

Time? Do I need time? How many days? How many months? A year? Two years? More?

Haruhiro started walking.

He submerged himself.

Stealth.

"Die," Barbara had said with a smile.

"You've got to die, Old Cat."

Stealth was composed of what could broadly be categorized as three different techniques:

The first, to eliminate your presence—Hide.

The second, to move with your presence eliminated—Swing.

The third, to utilize all of your senses to detect the presences of others—
Sense.

“Become a corpse.”

She’d roughed him up good.

“If you can’t do it yourself, I’ll help.”

She’d broken his fingers, collarbone, and ribs. It had hurt so badly he hadn’t been able to breathe, and then she’d ordered him to die.

She was kind of awful.

Besides, what’d she call me Old Cat for?

“Because you’ve got the eyes of an old cat.”

Barbara had been torn apart and killed. Or had she been killed and then torn apart? They’d been carrying her arms and legs around on spears. Her torso had been chopped into two or three pieces with the entrails hanging out.

Part of the corpse had been lying at his feet. Just her head. Her right eye had been closed, her left eye slightly open, though it hadn’t been looking at anything in particular, obviously. Her right cheek had been pressed to the cobbles with her whole face sagging to that side. Her face had borne several cuts. It had been filthy with blood too.

He remembered it vividly. It didn’t hurt. Barbara-sensei was dead. Haruhiro had seen her body for himself. The facts were what they were, and that was it.

“Old Cat. Here’s the thing. You’ve got a wide perspective, and you don’t scare easily. Your thinking’s only average, though. You don’t overestimate yourself, and you’ve got the stubbornness to work through things a little at a time.”

Haruhiro had been her humble pupil. But Barbara-sensei had misjudged him. His perspective was narrow, and he wasn’t as unshakable as she’d thought. His thinking was slower than average. He didn’t overestimate himself because he had no expectations for himself whatsoever. Haruhiro wasn’t stubborn.

“You’re not the type who can do things if he tries. You’re the type that tries until he can do things. That’s why, right now, it’s good that there are things you can’t do. Because someday you’re going to be able to do them.”

He didn't need consolation. Words of encouragement wouldn't make him rise to the occasion. Barbara-sensei was dead. The dead offered no consolation. No encouragement either.

Kuzaku and Setora had died too. They were supposed to be dead now, but they had gotten back up. Merry's work.

No. That wasn't Merry.

Merry was dead.

He'd brought her back.

No. She hadn't come back.

She'd been turned into someone else. Not Merry. The No-Life King.

"I love you," Merry had said.

They'd held one another. Kissed. Had that not been Merry either?

"Haru. I love you. Don't let go of me."

Don't let go of me. She'd said that clearly. That wasn't Merry? Really? That wasn't her will? Just someone else borrowing her body to make it say that? Did he really think that? What about Kuzaku? Or Setora? Was Merry not inside the No-Life King anymore? Would he never be able to speak to her again?

"Don't let go of me."

Had Haruhiro already let her go? They'd been separated. Merry wasn't here. That was a fact. He wasn't supposed to let her go. Hadn't wanted to let her go. But he had. He shouldn't have abandoned her. Shouldn't have run away. He wanted to be with her. He shouldn't have left her alone. He needed to be by her side, no matter what. He wanted to be with her forever.

Was it too late now? Really? He'd really never be able to speak to her again? Never see her face? Never hear her voice? Wasn't Merry still out there, somewhere? Wasn't she inside the No-Life King, crying and screaming?

Don't let go of me. Don't leave me alone. Haru. Don't let go of me.

No. Haruhiro knew. This was Merry, after all. She was probably wishing for something like this instead:

It's okay. I'm fine. You don't have to worry about me. I want you to forget me. Tell yourself I'm not here anymore. Act as if I never existed to begin with. Stay away from where I am.

That's why Haruhiro shouldn't have let go of her. That same Merry had told him not to let her go. She'd realized that there was something unfathomable inside her. She'd sensed it. She had to have been afraid that it would take over and replace her at some point. Considering what Merry was like, she must have worried about it a lot.

Should she push Haruhiro and her other comrades away? Would it be better to just disappear? But they'd be in trouble without a priest. She couldn't do that to them.

It was possible that she had been plagued by thoughts like those. She must have felt lonely. Maybe she had desperately wanted to avoid being alone? Maybe she *couldn't* be alone.

Merry had told Haruhiro not to let her go, as if clinging to him. Her situation must have been pretty bad.

What should I do? What can I do? Is there even any way for someone like me to fix this?

If he called out to Merry and said, *I'm here for you*, it wouldn't matter if she couldn't hear his voice.

What if Kuzaku and Setora had turned into something unrecognizable when he met them again?

"...I'm glad."

Suddenly, the memory of a conversation he'd had with Shihoru in Darunggar came back to him.

"That you're...our leader. Our comrade. ...And friend."

What was there to be glad about?

Nothing.

"Haruhiro-kun..."

He could see Shihoru's perfect smile in his mind like she was right there in front of him.

"You're the best leader we could ask for... You know that?"

He wished he could be. This wouldn't have happened if Haruhiro really had been the best leader.

What was Shihoru doing now? Was she inside the Forbidden Tower? The whole hill was buried under the sekaishu, tower and all. Was she okay? Either way, she'd forgotten Haruhiro. She didn't remember the days when she'd been one of his precious comrades.

Maybe that's for the best?

Shihoru had also forgotten the deep pain of losing someone. That wound had vanished entirely for her.

It's fine, isn't it?

It's fine. Just fine.

No. If he truly was fine with it, his thoughts wouldn't have kept going back to her.

Haruhiro had let go of Merry. Why had he done that? How could he have? It had been a mistake. He'd made a huge mistake. One he could never take back. There was no returning to the past. No way to make up for it.

I'm pathetic. A disgrace. Completely wretched. I've gotta be able to make some kind of decision about this, at least.

If he was going to move forward, he should move forward. If he was going to stop, he should stay put. If he wanted to run away, then he just had to turn tail and flee.

What do I want to do? Nothing, because I can't do anything? Well, then I'm being awfully indecisive about it. Do I want someone to give me a push? I've got people who'll support me, right? Do I want them to tell me how to do every little thing? To order me around, saying do this or do that?

"You're not the type who can do things if he tries..."

Barbara-sensei had actually had a good read on him.

Had he ever thought, *I can do this if I try?*

“You’re the type that tries until he can do things.”

He’d had no other choice. Since there was almost nothing he could do, he’d had to try until he could at least do something. Always grasping for a solution.

Looking up at the cruelly beautiful stars above the Quickwind Plains, Itsukushima had said, “I’m alive.”

He’d lived for much longer than Haruhiro. As an experienced hunter, he must have met a lot of people, and said goodbye to them too. The only foundation that man had to stand on was the knowledge that he had managed to survive this long.

Alive.

Still alive.

Living.

Just living.

Living, and living, and living.

“I’m...alive too.”

He felt guilty about it.

Manato.

Moguzo.

Barbara-sensei.

And all the other people he could never see again.

“I’m still alive.”

Haruhiro headed toward the plaza in front of Tenboro Tower. There were more of the sekaishu here than anywhere else. In some places, a thick river of sekaishu ran down the middle of the street, while in others, several thin sekaishu pipes crawled along the side of the road. The pipe-like sekaishu cut across the street occasionally too. Every path had at least some of them.

Were they moving toward the plaza, or away from it? Were they stretching from the plaza out toward the other parts of Alterna?

He spotted the bodies of fallen soldiers. One was lying face down on the road. Another was curled up by the side of it. They were rotting. He didn't see any sign of wounds taken in combat. But a number of the corpses were still under the sekaishu now. Had they been enveloped by it and suffocated? Or had they been crushed to death?

Haruhiro climbed up on top of a building, then started moving from one rooftop to the next, toward the plaza. It was in sight now.

Haruhiro hid in the shadow of the brick chimney of a two-story building that overlooked the plaza. His breath had become a bit labored. He took a moment to steady it and wait for his pulse to return to normal.

Haruhiro stepped out of the shadow he was hiding in. He leaned his upper body forward, moving ahead with a low posture, and stopping at the edge of the tiled roof.

The plaza wasn't completely full of sekaishu. Their pitch-black forms only covered a third, no, about a fourth of its total area. There had been a black flood, but it was settling down. The dark water was finally receding. That was how the situation looked to him.

Near the center of the plaza, the sekaishu had formed a jet-black coil. It was more than a hundred meters from Haruhiro's location, and he'd been so distracted by the other sekaishu that he hadn't noticed it until he'd squinted at it.

There was something on top of the coil. Or maybe *someone*? What was that? It looked whitish. Could it have been a human? If so, they had to be dead. It could have been a human body. A corpse, standing atop a jet-black coil? It didn't look like it was lying down. Maybe it was kneeling.

White. Were those clothes? Was that corpse wearing whitish clothes? Or was it wearing nothing at all? Was it a naked corpse? It didn't seem to be dressed, but it did have something in its hands. Something shining with a dull luster. One in each hand. Could those be weapons? Swords? Or maybe one was a shield?

The wind was picking up. Though there were no clouds blocking the sun as it set in the west, the sky was becoming overcast too. The wind was cold and moist. It might rain once night fell.

A bell rang faintly, its tone deep and heavy, making Haruhiro look toward the bell tower in East Town. The bells in Alterna used to ring every two hours from six o'clock in the morning until six o'clock at night to tell the time. Had someone just rung them? No, that couldn't be it. Had something struck one of the bells? Or was it swaying in the wind?

Haruhiro looked back at the jet-black coil. And the corpse. He thought it was a human corpse. A naked body with a sword and shield that gave off a dull light.

Something was strange about this. Unbelievably so, to be honest, and he felt deeply suspicious. There were no living people in Alterna. Hopefully, she'd evacuated or been able to escape, because Eliza hadn't been at the thieves' guild. The soldiers of the expeditionary force were all dead and rotting.

Was that a corpse? It was well over a hundred meters away. All he could make out was the color and general shape of it. He couldn't see it in detail, but it was probably a man with his head hung, facing the other direction. A human male. Not living. Carrying a sword and shield.

Something was wrong. The sekaishu, that jet-black coil, was moving. When did that happen? It had been stationary before. Inactive. Or had he just been too far away to detect its subtle movements? Whatever the case, it was winding now. What was the sekaishu doing with that corpse, the human one, the naked male he assumed was dead? He didn't know, but the body was gradually being taken into the sekaishu.

What had it been doing on top of the jet-black coil in the first place? If that was a human corpse, it was hard to imagine that he'd climbed on top of that coiled sekaishu of his own accord. No, it was unthinkable.

A man had died. He was naked, carrying a sword and shield. Had something happened that had caused the man's corpse to coincidentally end up on top of the sekaishu? Was that even possible?

This was all assuming that it *was* just a corpse. What if it wasn't?

The sekaishu started to adhere to the surface of the man's body. It was trying to cover him up. The man was naked, but he was being clad in a sekaishu as dark as the night. Why didn't the sekaishu try to cover his sword and shield too?

Were the sword and shield shining in the light of the sunset? The sun wasn't high. It was already sinking. The sunlight, red as if it was about to burn out, didn't reach the man, so it wasn't that his sword and shield were reflecting its light. The man's sword and shield had to be shining on their own, even if their light wasn't especially powerful.

The head of the man clad in the darkness of night had been hanging. Until now, that was.

The *night-clad one* raised its head.

Did this mean he hadn't been dead? He wasn't a corpse. Was the man alive? Or was it because of the sekaishu? The night-like sekaishu covering his entire body was moving. Was that what was making it look like the man—no, the night-clad one—was moving on his own?

The night-clad one rose. The coiled sekaishu beneath it was lifting it up, and simultaneously changing its own form. It was no longer just a pedestal for the night-clad one. It now served as a mount. The night-clad one wasn't standing on it. They were riding it. The sekaishu had formed into a four-legged beast, like a horse, and was now carrying the night-clad one.

Haruhiro backed away.

What?

What is that?

What the hell is that?

Haruhiro's pulse was racing. He was losing his head. Right. He was shaken. That thing was bizarre. Unlike any sekaishu he'd seen so far. It was blatantly different. What was that thing?

There was someone inside it. With a shining sword and shield. What were they? Not just some random sword. Not just some simple shield. That was a special sword. A special shield. Like a relic, maybe? A relic. Oh, yeah. Were they

that sword and shield?

The night-clad one looked toward him. Its black horse turned its head in his direction too. No, that was no horse. It was headless. It had nothing where its head should be. Its legs were like a spider's, only it had less of them.

Haruhiro was crouched low, not moving a muscle at this point. Was he managing to maintain his Stealth? He wasn't sure. But that thing was over a hundred meters away. It wouldn't be able to spot him easily. Besides, could the night-clad one even see? Did it have five senses, like a human? Was the human inside the night-clad one alive? Or was he dead?

Haruhiro was shaken. He needed to calm down. He knew that, but he still couldn't do it. He wasn't calm enough to be able to calm down.

The night-clad one turned toward him but didn't stir.

Relics.

Shinohara had been carrying a relic sword and shield.

Time to run.

Why did Haruhiro come to that conclusion? He couldn't be sure. His body might have moved before he finished thinking. Haruhiro turned, preparing to do an about face and run away.

"Kh...!"

He didn't anticipate that a night-clad one would be there. On the same roof as him. On the chimney, rather. A night-clad one was standing on the chimney. Not the same one as in the plaza. This one wore sparkling gold armor and a crown, and carried a staff. It was a second night-clad one.

Haruhiro ran. The night-clad one didn't jump down from the chimney. It jumped *up*. And *floated*. The night-clad one was floating silently in the air. Haruhiro was distracted by the unnatural way it moved. It made no sense to him. Even as he wondered what the hell these things were, he was running across the slanted tiles of the roof. Haruhiro didn't jump across to the next building, but down into the gap between them. In other words, he fell. As he plunged toward the ground, he kicked off the neighboring building. That

immediately turned him around, and he grabbed on to an indentation in the building he'd jumped from. Pain shot through his wrists, but that wasn't the reason he let go. He dropped intentionally and landed in the alley. Looking up, he saw only the sky between the roofs, no night-clad one. Haruhiro raced down the alleyway, which was just wide enough for one person to barely pass through, until he reached the road. The night-clad one was in the air above the street. It seemed to be lying in wait for Haruhiro.

The night-clad one turned their staff toward Haruhiro. That wasn't just any old staff. The same went for the armor and crown. Haruhiro had finally started to figure it out. Relics. The night-clad ones had relics. They were sekaishu humans who used relics.

Haruhiro sprinted away. The night-clad one's staff flashed like lightning. He didn't even think about trying to dodge. That staff had to be a relic. But what kind? He didn't know anything about it. How could he possibly know if it could be dodged?

He'd managed to dive into another alleyway for now, so it looked like that light had missed him. He ran down the alley, breathing heavily, but when he exited the other side, the night-clad one was floating in the air above him again.

"Ugh..."

Haruhiro turned back down the alley. The staff. The staff's light was coming after him. With a flash, it tore a chunk out of the face of the building, burning and scorching the stone. If it landed a solid hit on him, he was screwed. He didn't stand a chance. There was a little window in the wall of the building on his right. Once he'd torn off the shutters and forced his way through it, he found himself in what looked like a kitchen.

I want to hide here. That was what he felt from the bottom of his heart, but he heard a noise. The night-clad one might have entered the building. He exited the kitchen into a hallway. There were stairs. Haruhiro raced up them, coming to a room on the second floor. Through a window, he could see the roof of the one-story building next to this one, so he jumped out onto it, and from there to the next roof, looking all around as he ran.

What about the night-clad one? Where was it? And what about the other

one? The one with the shadow spider? Was that one still in the plaza? Or was it chasing Haruhiro too? Had it joined the search for him? Where was the night-clad one with the staff? He didn't know. He couldn't see it anywhere. But even if he couldn't see it, he knew it was there. Probably closing in on him.

Haruhiro had entered the southern district at some point. He couldn't see either night-clad one. Heading down to street level, he spotted a sekaishu thrashing about on the side of the road. It was jumping up and down, writhing. But Haruhiro didn't even think about stopping. He didn't have time. He saw a figure of some sort up ahead. Humanoid. Black. A shadow? A black human figure? What was that? Haruhiro turned right and went around a corner. If he'd gone straight, he'd have been heading right for that black figure. He had a feeling that wouldn't have been good for him.

The sekaishu were going wild in the direction he'd turned too, with several tube-shaped ones flopping about violently. The street couldn't have been even two meters wide. The tube-shaped sekaishu lashed the ground like whips. Each time they did, they got thicker or thinner. Haruhiro couldn't slip between them. He had to wait for the tube-shaped sekaishu to lower themselves to a height of twenty or thirty centimeters, then try to leap over them.

His left foot got caught.

“Urgh...!”

At that very moment, the sekaishu broke at the point where Haruhiro's left foot had hit it. No, that wasn't quite right. It hadn't broken. It rapidly expanded, and a black figure jumped out. Born from the sekaishu. A sekaishu human. Haruhiro nearly fell on his face. The sekaishu human sprang at him. A human. It had the shape of a man, but no head. Haruhiro reflexively planted a kick on his attacker and then booked it out of there. The tube-shaped forms swung about furiously, while the human forms chased after him. There were horrible slamming sounds behind him, but Haruhiro didn't turn to look. It took everything he had just to avoid the tube-shaped sekaishu and keep moving forward.

When he finally made it to a wider road, he saw the Volunteer Soldier Corps office on his left. The old flag with a red crescent moon on a white field was

gone now, but the sign that said Alterna Frontier Army Volunteer Soldier Corps Red Moon was still there. Haruhiro ran toward the office. All around him, the tube-shaped sekaishu were thrashing. He looked back for a second, and he saw them. The sekaishu humans. Not just one. There were more now. Lots of them. Chasing Haruhiro.

Something flashed overhead, and Haruhiro jumped to the side. It was the night-clad one's staff. There was a loud crack as it burned and scorched the ground. Haruhiro's vision spun as he rolled and tried to get back up. The sekaishu humans weren't his only problem. The other one was here too, in the group chasing him. The night-clad one riding the shadow spider and carrying the shining sword and shield. He could see the night-clad one with the staff floating up in the evening sky too. Their staff was pointed toward him.

There was another flash as Haruhiro was about to pass by the Volunteer Soldier Corps office. Someone poked their head out of the gap between it and the next building. Someone? A person? Yes, it was an honest-to-goodness human being. Long-haired, with a scarf covering the lower half of her face. She didn't speak. Just gestured to him. It was probably at the same exact moment that the night-clad one's staff unleashed its light. Haruhiro slipped into the gap between the buildings. A tight fit. He had to turn sideways to get through. The woman was already well ahead of him, and then suddenly, she was gone. Vanished.

"Whaaa?!"

More and more sekaishu humans were pressing into the gap. Almost panicking, Haruhiro kept moving toward where the woman had disappeared. A hole. There was a hole in the side of the building. No, an entrance, huh? It was small. He wasn't sure he could get in even if he crouched. This wasn't the time to hesitate, though. Haruhiro managed to crawl through somehow. It was almost pitch black inside, and it smelled of mold. This room was apparently in the Volunteer Soldier Corps office, but he didn't know anything about it. He'd never been in here.

"Come on, over here," the woman said.

As he headed toward her voice, he banged into a wall. She seized his left arm

and pulled him along. Haruhiro didn't resist. It sounded like she'd opened a door. It was dark on the other side of it too. They went through a small room or a short hall, and then she opened another door. Haruhiro felt her let go of his arm. She was doing something. Trying to lift some heavy object, apparently. But Haruhiro didn't have time to help before she managed to get it up. His eyes were adapting to the darkness. The floor, huh? There was a hole in the floor. It had been covered. She'd opened the lid on it.

"You go down first."

Haruhiro was already slipping into the hole before she could give the order. There was an iron ladder inside, but no light whatsoever. Once he was a few rungs down, he could no longer see anything. That didn't stop him from continuing, though. He heard the lid closing above him. And as for the woman? It sounded like everything was fine with her. She was climbing down too.

He took the ladder down as far as he could. It was moist here, and there was an indescribable stench filling the air. If he kept clinging to the ladder, he'd be in her way, so he moved away from it, but he couldn't bring himself to go any farther than that. Eventually, she made her way down. She grabbed Haruhiro's left arm again. Then she grabbed his right arm too. He couldn't see her, but they were facing one another. Because of the scarf covering her nose and mouth, he could barely even sense her breath. He just felt her warmth, the slight sensation of her body heat in the darkness.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Yeah. Somehow." Haruhiro let out a sigh. She hadn't been at the thieves' guild. Maybe she had been able to evacuate, or maybe something much worse had happened to her. That was what he'd been thinking. "Eliza-san... I'm glad you're safe too."

She seemed to nod silently. She was alive. Thank goodness she was alive. She was his senior in the thieves' guild, a mentor who tried not to show her face for some reason. They weren't close. Honestly, he didn't know her well at all. Even so, she was one of his precious few remaining acquaintances.

Haruhiro felt something touch his left shoulder. After a moment, he realized it was her forehead. Her hands were quivering slightly as she held his arms.

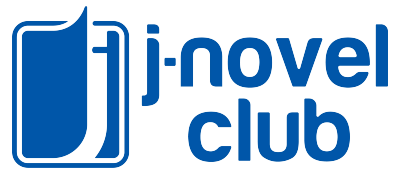
Haruhiro nodded. It was the only thing he could do. His words had left him.

Afterword

I've drawn up something like a timeline while writing this novel. It records more or less everything that happens. Who, what, where, and when. I primarily write the events centered around Haruhiro, the protagonist, but as we approach the final stage, there are a lot of different things happening at the same time, in a lot of different places. I considered depicting events strictly from Haruhiro's perspective. However, rack my brain as I might, that was going to leave too many mysteries unsolved when the story ended, so for this volume I took a different approach. That said, I want to focus on Haruhiro and the party as much as possible as we head toward the end. I do have every intention of bringing things to a conclusion, and it feels like we're getting there, but it just won't end. It feels like it may take a while still.

To my editor, Harada-san, to Eiri Shirai-san, to the designers at KOMEWORKS among others, to everyone involved in the production and sale of this book, and finally to all of you people now holding this book, I offer my heartfelt appreciation and all of my love. Now, I lay down my pen for today.

Ao Jyumonji



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

[Newsletter](#)

And you can read the latest chapters of series like this by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

[J-Novel Club Membership](#)

Copyright

Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash: Volume 19

by Ao Jyumonji

Translated by Sean McCann Edited by Adam Fogle

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2022 Ao Jyumonji Illustrations by Eiri Shirai

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2022 by OVERLAP

This English edition is published by arrangement with OVERLAP, Inc., Tokyo
English translation © 2022 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: December 2022